ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

The Mad Movie

by

Fred MacIsaac

Author of

"Rogues' Rule,"

"A Blaze of Glory," *etc.*

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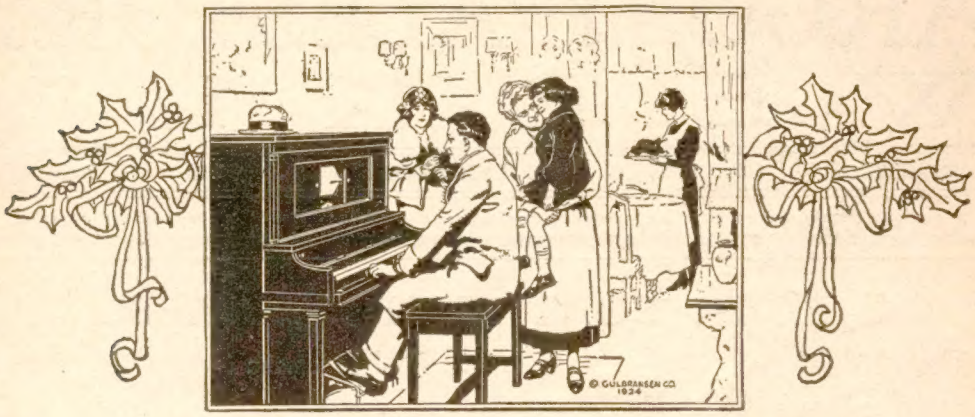

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

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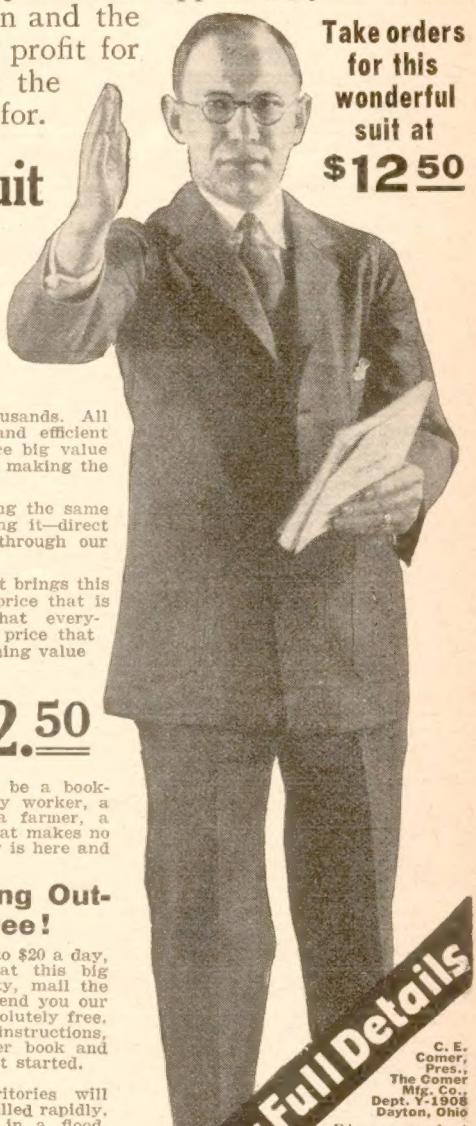

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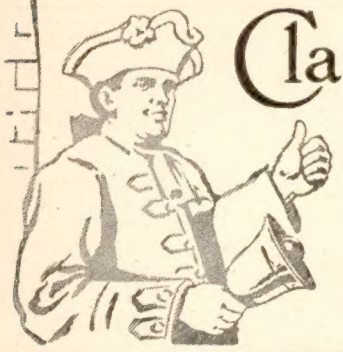

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXIII SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12, 1925 NUMBER 6

The Mad Movie

By FRED MacISAAC

Author of "The Four Goliaths," "Soft Money," etc.

CHAPTER I.

UNDER THE KLEIGS.

ON a little balcony overlooking the superb ballroom suddenly appeared a trumpeter from whose long trumpet was suspended a square banner bearing the royal coat of arms. He blew a mellow call.

A second later, wide double doors at the far end of the big hall opened wide and revealed a gorgeous chamberlain with a tall golden staff.

"Gentlemen and ladies," he announced, "his majesty, the king!"

Immediately an orchestra in the balcony opposite to that in which the trumpeter had blown his signal burst into a jubilant and rare melody—the national hymn.

Hundreds had been dancing before the trumpet call; these had scurried to the sides of the hall and formed in two brilliant lanes through which the royal procession might march to the great gilt throne.

The chamberlain entered with sedate and pompous mien, followed by a dozen of the Royal Guards, two by two, carrying glittering axes. Then came a group of gentlemen in waiting to his majesty, proud and aristocratic, wondrously attired, and finally—the

king, a regal looking person with a long Bourbon nose, who wore the uniform of a colonel in the Royal Hussars, a mélange of reds, yellows and greens, gorgeous enough to please the most flamboyant of monarchs. There was no queen, with her attendant throng of women. His majesty was a bachelor.

As he walked down the living lane the gentleman bowed from the waist, the ladies curtsied low. Then something untoward happened. A young noblewoman, one of the most beautiful of all, toppled over, and lay on her face in the path of royalty.

For a second there was utter silence; his majesty did not move, nor did the gaudy throng. Then the king spoke. He said:

"This is a hell of a note."

A very loud voice shouted: "cut." Then the company broke into motion. Two or three women rushed to the girl who had fainted, while the royalty himself risked his tight-fitting waistcoat to lend a hand. At the same moment an angry little man with bald head, and coatless, whose long black trousers contrasted queerly with the satin breeches and silken gowns, jumped into the middle of the scene.

"Ruined!" he wailed. "What's the matter with her, hey? Take her out of here. Don't let her in again. Right in the foreground of the scene, she fell, and we got to do it all over again."

"Go sit on a tack, Abe," said the regal ruler. "The poor girl didn't collapse because she wanted to."

"Let her find some other place to have fits," bellowed the man called Abe. "Look, there are scratches on the floor."

"Throw a rug over that place, it's at the foot of the throne," said the king. "Let's see if the poor kid is dead or something."

But the girl who had spoiled the scene was not dead. She had been carried to a blue satin couch, and she was now sitting up, looking dazed and distressed, while a marchioness held her hand.

Abe reached her in two strides.

"So," he said. "You have all the studio to faint in, and you pick the center of the picture. You get your things on and get out of here, and don't come back. Fainters I don't want nohow."

"I am very sorry, Mr. Blatt," quavered the unfortunate young woman. "It came upon me so suddenly, I could not leave without disturbing the crowd, and the camera was working."

"So you pulled a Firpo right in front of the king, and the spangles on your dress they scratch the floor I had polished like a looking glass. You should be sorry. Outside, I say. Outside!"

"Wait a moment, Abe," said a deep but agreeable voice, and a tall young man with bow spectacles pushed through the crowd.

"That fall was very dramatic, too good to lose. It has suggested an idea I am going to work into the continuity. But we'll have to write in a part for this young woman to justify its use."

"Bah!" protested Abe. "I just fired her. She scratched my floor."

"I want her."

"For having a fit and putting a scene on the bum, getting scratches on the floor I protected for three days by making everybody wear felt slippers, you promote her from an extra to an actress. Oi, but this is a crazy business!"

Abe Blatt, the assistant director, scratched his bald head, grinned a foxy grin and beat a retreat. The girl on the couch smiled a radiant, transported smile. The director patted her familiarly on the shoulder. The two queenly women who had been assisting her drew away and glared like belligerent cats. The grand company shifted from one foot to the other as it waited for further action, and then half a dozen young men, their arms full of white felt slippers began to pass among them. Each person pulled the felt affairs over the shoes so that the polish on Abe's ballroom floor should be undimmed.

A dark wizened little man with a Hebraic cast of countenance was figuring rapidly in a notebook. He was the cost expert and he was working out that the delay caused by the accident and the time necessary to get ready for a repetition of the scene would cost the company in salaries and overhead nine hundred dollars. A stock trade joke was that every six weeks the Tonmouth Studios hired a new cost expert and shipped the old one to an asylum.

Oscar Sterling, the director of the picture, seemed in no way pressed for time. He continued to pat the girl on the shoulder.

"What's your name, deary?" he asked.

"Mary Curren, Mr. Sterling."

"Funny I never noticed you before. You have a face for pictures. Been an extra long?"

"I've been working a day at a time, for five or six weeks."

"Why did you faint? I am sure it was not a fit, as Abe so gallantly suggested."

The girl smiled rather piteously. "I was hungry. I hadn't eaten since yesterday and it's four o'clock now."

"Starving! My God, what a situation. One of you girls take her to the cafeteria and feed her. Here's a dollar. Then bring her back because I want to work up that scene. Now for business. Hey, Abe, let's have that waltz again. I'll finish this march to the throne when I've worked up the business for Miss Curren."

He turned away toward his director's platform. Half a dozen assistants went through the throng calling out instructions. Those who had put on the felt slippers immediately kicked them off and in a few moments the royal guests were waltzing to the music of a really fine orchestra.

A thin youth pulled Sterling's sleeve, and he turned impatiently.

"The waltz is absurd, as I have told you before," said the young man. "It didn't come in for twenty years after the period of this picture, and you know it."

"I've asked you not to come 'round bothering me. You sold your script and got your money. I prefer a waltz to a minuet because there is more action. Beat it, will you."

"Oh, all right," grumbled the author, who took up a position somewhat in the rear.

Sterling crooked a finger to the King who came running.

"Chance to show your goodness of heart. This girl's brother is in prison, charged with an attempt on your life. She tries to intercept you as you are about to mount the throne, faints from emotion. You graciously grant her request. Just a good little bit. It'll take very little footage."

"All right, Mr. Sterling."

"Scene is all right up to time of fall. We show them carrying her off, you order her brought back, a few moments later, hear her prayer, grant it, and back to the continuity. Very simple."

"A fine touch," said the actor, ingratiatingly.

"Just little things like this show the kind of man who is directing," said Sterling with naïve vanity.

Brigham Brown, the author, was near enough to overhear the conversation. He observed to a dark young woman at his left:

"He will fill the production up with little bits like this, insist, in the cutting room, upon retaining them, and cut out most of the story to keep them. That's what's the trouble with pictures."

"You should worry," retorted the girl. "You got a good price for your yarn. Let him do what he likes with it. After all his name on the screen as director means more than yours as author."

The writer shrugged his shoulders. "As you say, I was well paid, but it makes me sick to watch what is going on. Why, this whole darn ballroom scene wasn't in the book. He just stuck it in at a cost of fifty or sixty thousand or so."

"The exhibitors won't buy a picture unless it has a ballroom or a cabaret. Sterling knows what they want."

"Well I'm going to beat it. I never will be missed."

"You said a mouthful."

The disgusted author withdrew. As he had surmised he was not missed. Sterling got all the waltzing he wished, repeated the entire royal entrance from the beginning, cut at the point where the girl had fainted, intending to paste in that bit of realism. Then he gave a close-up of the King registering compassion, and dismissed the multitude for the day.

"All extras in this scene report again to-morrow," called Abe Blatt, an announcement which was received with every evidence of pleasure.

By this time Mary Curren was back with a full stomach and a grateful smile. Sterling immediately shot a scene in which she

kneeled at the foot of the throne and exhibited gratitude when the monarch bent his head in gracious acquiescence to her request. That ended the day's labor.

"Abe," said Sterling. "Pay this young woman ten dollars to-day instead of six, and put her on the list for the next two or three days."

"I can't tell you how grateful I am, Mr. Sterling," said the girl as the celebrated director prepared to depart for the day.

"Forget it," he said with a careless wave of his hand. "See that you eat enough, and don't faint before the camera again; it might have set us back a great deal."

"I won't, sir, you may be sure of that."

Mary Curren returned to the extras' dressing room where she removed the beautiful ball gown, washed the paint off of her face with great care, and donned her demure black street costume.

Two of the extra girls accompanied her from the studio. They were frankly envious.

"I'll say you have all the luck," said one of them, a tall athletic-looking brunette. "You catch the director's attention, have a scene tucked into the script in which you appear alone with the King, get a chance to be known on the screen, and all because you were dumbbell enough to faint on the ballroom floor."

"Dumb?" queried the second girl, a scrawny little blonde without her makeup and costume. "Dumb as a fox. Don't tell me she didn't work it all out at home and pull it to attract attention. Kid, it went so good it must have been rehearsed. And then the pathetic stuff about being starved. Nobody but a director would be bonehead enough to believe that. Why that dress you got on must have cost a hundred, though it's kind of worn. Looks to me like a Paris model."

Mary smiled faintly. "It was a Paris model, I bought it in France last year when I was there with my mother."

"With her mother. With her mother. Did you get that mother stuff? With some butter and egg man, more likely."

"That will be enough of your rotten insinuations," said Mary Curren with just indignation. "If I were that sort of girl I shouldn't be around anxious to earn six dollars a day as a movie extra."

"Oh, the flossies have their ups and downs," retorted the little girl, not at all abashed. "I suppose you was in society, but your old man went broke in Wall Street, your mother died of a broken heart and you are out bravely earning a living for your baby brother. I seen a plot like that in a fillum once."

"I shall not discuss my private affairs with you at all."

"Don't mind her, dear," said the dark girl. "She's just jealous because you had a bit of luck. If you had been hanging around studios as long as we have, without ever once getting out of the mob, you might feel that way too. Once I got in the front row and did some acting, but they cut it out of the film. You are only around the lots a few weeks and you get a close-up. No wonder she raves."

The little girl laughed rather bitterly. "She's right, kid. I didn't mean that stuff about the butter and egg man. I was just being catty."

"All right," smiled Mary Curren. "I won't stay offended. I'm going to take the subway here, girls. See you to-morrow."

The other two walked off arm in arm while Mary descended the stairs and was soon battling with a rush hour crowd for the privilege of getting a foothold in an uptown express.

CHAPTER II.

TWO IN ONE ROOM.

A PLEASANT odor of sizzling bacon caused her nostrils to expand as she entered the one room, kitchenette and bath apartment which she shared with Henrietta Crosby, stenographer and friend.

Henrietta had reached home before her, and as no dinner engagement was upon the schedule for either partner, she set about preparing a kitchenette meal. With an apron around her waist, her sleeves rolled up and a cap to protect her elaborate hair arrangements she greeted the picture actress cheerfully from the closet so Ritzily styled a kitchenette.

"Hello, Mary Pickford. How did you make out to-day?"

"Oh, Etta, I had the most marvelous good fortune, and all because I was too ill to eat dinner last night, and got no chance to snatch a bite at the studio."

Excitedly she told the events of the afternoon. Mary was a very agreeable picture as she related her adventure. She was what is considered a film type. Her hair was blonde and fluffy, her features were clean-cut, almost Grecian in their perfection. Her figure was much too thin, that frail, ethereal, willowy, gracefulness which is the result of anæmia or determined self-starvation.

If you have met many film favorites in life you must have noticed that they are smaller and frailer than the ordinary and healthy woman. The camera has a trick of making normally proportioned women seem stocky; a girl who inclines to plumpness can only be a comedian, while the undernourished young woman comes out upon the screen as perfectly proportioned.

Mary Curren was ten pounds under weight for her height, resulting from achievement of several months of abstention from nourishing food in quantities greater than would keep life in a healthy canary.

"And only think, Etta," she concluded, "I had a scene with the king. I will be shown close-up, so you can recognize me. Who knows but some director will like my looks and give me a real chance? Lots of girls got started that way."

"Well, darling," said Henrietta, "I hope you get started soon. In the six weeks you have been paddling around those studios you have earned less than a hundred dollars. After you have paid your share of the rent you haven't had money enough to buy yourself a decent meal. It's lucky you are dieting because you'd consider yourself starving otherwise. And you won't let me lend you any money."

"I've got to keep thin, but it looks as though I would make lots this week. I got ten dollars to-day and I am called for the next two or three days."

"You've got rich relations. What a simp you are not to go to them and tell them how you are up against it. That brother of your mother's would do something for you. He's so rich it would be disgraceful for him to let you die in the streets."

"I'm not going to die in the streets. On the contrary I am going to be rich and famous and snub my relatives when they come around claiming relationship. To-night I am going to blow you to a movie. Celia Darling is playing in Too Many Loves at the corner theater, and I want you to see if you think I look like her."

"You poor nut. After working in pictures all day you go out and spend your evening watching them run off. I should think you'd had enough."

"I don't go for entertainment, but to study the acting. It is my profession and the best way to perfect myself in it is to see how those who are successful do their work."

"And besides you are a movie fan. I don't blame those waitresses and department store girls for going batty over Tommy Meighan, but you have an education, you speak several languages, you paint and sing, and have traveled and have seen the best plays. Why should you go bugs over a lot of stupid films? I'd like to see a real play with living actors."

Mary patted her on the arm. "So you shall, when we are both making more money. But if you go to a play and pick a bad one you are out several dollars while a poor film only costs you twenty-five cents. Of course there are lots of poor pictures, but there are just as many stupid plays, so critics say. Certainly there is nothing more thrilling than a good one. Sterling's pictures are always good, don't you think so?"

"I never notice the director's name. Who's Sterling anyway?"

Mary flushed a little. "He is the director who gave me my chance to-day. He was so kind and considerate to me when I fainted."

Etta emitted a grunt. "I've heard about those kind directors. They promise to make a star out of a girl and the first thing she knows she is ruined and fired."

"Oh, but Mr. Sterling isn't that sort."

"Maybe," said Etta. "Anyway it won't do any harm to see one of his pictures. For

that matter a girl is up against it no matter where she works. I've left two jobs because the boss thought I should entertain him nights. I can take care of myself, but you are such a helpless trusting little thing, for all your education and upbringing. It's a crime that a kid like you should have to earn her own living."

Mary threw her arms around the rather plump figure of her friend.

"Etta, you are a dear. You think you are clever enough to take care of yourself and me, too, but I wager that you would fall for a fascinating stranger quicker than I should.

"Just because I am small and wistful looking doesn't mean I haven't any gray matter. I do like pictures, but I didn't go in for picture work because I was stage struck, exactly. When mother died and her annuity stopped I had to earn my living.

"I might make twenty-five dollars a week in a store and the work would kill me. If I became a secretary I might, in five or ten years, work up to fifty dollars. But if I should make a hit in the films I could earn a thousand dollars a week in no time at all. It's not impossible. I am the type, and lots of girls have done it."

"Yes, by falling for some married man who happened to own a film company."

"That's such nonsense. Do you realize there are thousands of girls and only a comparatively few men? They have no trouble finding sweethearts if they wish them, and I assure you they couldn't possibly make stars out of all the girls who are careless about their morals. They are tremendously business-like, regard us as so many automatons to make profits for them, and I am sure most of them live happily with their wives and families and laugh at foolish young women who wish to get on the screen by irregular methods. In my six weeks' experience I haven't had the slightest amorous attention from anybody, I assure you."

"Well," replied Etta, not at all convinced, "maybe you're right and maybe not. I've read a lot about the movies."

"All rubbish. Get your hat on. I don't want to miss the short subject before the main picture."

"You're a glutton for punishment," laughed Etta. "Come on."

They hurried to the Bonanza Theater, a neighboring house not far away where the best seats cost a quarter and where the audience consisted of shop girls, clerks and families running as high as five or six children, including the babies. It was illy ventilated, the seats were not upholstered, the six-piece orchestra was as bad as musicians could be and hold their union cards; but they saw the same films which were exhibited in the Times Square district at first class theater prices. The Bonanza was about four weeks late on first runs, and it lacked the musical presentation which the picture palaces affect; otherwise there was no difference.

The girls found two seats on the aisle about halfway back, removed their hats and settled themselves for a pleasant two hours. Here and there a baby cried. One alien woman silenced her youngest by boldly nursing him in the dimness of the auditorium. Etta's sharp eyes discovered her; she nudged Mary who modestly turned her eyes away.

"Disgusting," she murmured. "Why do they bring babies to a place like this."

"Because they haven't servants to leave them with, and if they want a little entertainment themselves they have to bring the kiddies!"

"But think of the germs the poor babies can collect in a picture house."

"If the youngsters survive the germs where they live, they'll grow fat on these."

"I suppose so," sighed Mary. "What a pity."

"Forget it. Look at the screen."

The feature that night was a photoplay which drove Jake Rosen, manager of the Bonanza, into his office after the first reel. Rosen had about as much to say about what films he should show in his theater as a customer in a café regarding what goes into his corned beef hash.

He bought what is known as a program of pictures covering six months, which includes a number of fine features, a score or so of pretty good ones, and a dozen so bad that they could only be sold by grouping them with the excellent films.

This happened to be one of the last sort. The story was hopeless, the acting was wicked and the direction was horrible. The photography, on the whole, was good, for the producer had excellent lights, good cameras and picturesque locations.

As the plot unfolded, it proved so inane that even the audience in the Bonanza was bored, but it suffered philosophically; at least it was indoors, there was music, and pretty costumes, and the seats had not cost much, and there was nothing to do if it walked out, and one must expect a poor picture at least half the time.

Celia Darling, the star, was a pretty little thing who made cunning faces and charming gestures, while Bob Brown, the hero, looked something like Valentino. Wives were relieved from talking to their husbands while the film was running, and in the darkness young lovers could hold hands.

At its worst the picture house is better than sitting at home, such homes as most of the audience possessed. What on earth did New Yorkers do to entertain themselves before the era of photoplays? Oh, yes! The men hung out in saloons and the women visited one another and gossiped.

But Henrietta was audibly bored. Gifted or cursed with a sense of humor the banality of the film drove her wild with nervousness. Mary Curren frowned when she made amusing comments on silly scenes, so she had perforce to sit in silence.

Mary's attitude was that of the student. She was learning what to avoid. Every expression of the star, every gesture, every pose, every movement of head or hand or foot she put down in her mental notebook. She observed errors of direction, examples of poor judgment in shooting scenes, cases of incoherence which she set down to poor selection in the cutting room. From a bad film she was able to learn something, for she was in the film business to succeed, and the only way to get ahead was to learn her business.

For her the evening passed too quickly. She sniffed at the cartoon comedy which followed the feature for that was done with the pens of many artists and without the aid of human actors, therefore it did not interest her, though it was by far the most clever feature on the bill.

"Well," remarked Henrietta when she saw "Good Night" flashed on the screen. "This is probably the most awful evening I ever spent in this palace of stupidity."

"It wasn't so bad," said Mary. "Of course the big film was an inferior production, but it had some merit. I wonder how Darling got that effect with her eyes when she heard that her father had died of typhoid fever. There is a lot about eye make-up I haven't found out yet."

"I think she is a dumb-bell and the man who made the picture must have done it in the asylum because how could he have got out? Are you rich enough to indulge in an ice cream soda?"

Mary laughed and squeezed her arm. "You poor dear, I suppose it was dreadful to you because you didn't have any incentive to study it."

"I go to the movies hoping to be amused and when they don't do it, I wish I was home reading a magazine. I can always shut the magazine if it bores me, but I can't get out of a picture house if I am with you because I'd have to chloroform you to take you with me. It seems to me there is more of a kick in the magazine stories than in the films, anyway."

"That's because of the censorship. The magazines can print pretty nearly anything they wish, while the films have to remember there are a dozen boards of censors in various states ready to jump on them if they get just the least bit *risqué*. In a picture in which I worked a couple of weeks ago they had to take one scene over four times, doing it differently each time, once to pass New York censors, once Ohio, once Pennsylvania and once Virginia. It's a frightful nuisance."

"I suppose so," yawned Etta. "Between ourselves what they have to do in the studios don't interest me much; the results are usually terrible anyway."

"Don't be absurd, you were crazy about 'Thief of Bagdad.'"

"That was all right, it's the exception that proves the rule."

"Wait till you see me in my close-up in the new picture."

"If they don't remove you in the cutting room you talk about."

"Wouldn't that be terrible! It would just break my heart."

"It's like my writing a three-page letter and then having the boss come out to say: 'Don't send that letter. Tear it up.'"

The girls reached the drug-store where they lingered over their ice cream sodas for some time, after which they reluctantly prepared to return to their little apartment.

As they turned off Broadway Etta said suddenly: "Did you see that fellow in that big car? He was staring at you as though he knew you."

"Just a masher, in all probability. They think, because they have an automobile, any girl will be glad to let them talk to her."

CHAPTER III.

INTRODUCING MR. GIBSON.

ETTA glanced over her shoulder and shuddered with excitement.

"He's coming after us," she breathed. "He has turned the car around and is coming down this street."

"Pay no attention," warned Mary. "The impudent thing, to imagine we would notice him! Walk right along and keep your head front."

They walked on self consciously. Mary and Etta were nice girls. No man had ever picked up either of them, though many had tried. But it is rather thrilling to be so attractive that men follow one in the street, and while they would attend to his case properly if he dared to address them, still they were not exactly outraged or insulted.

The big car hummed along close to the curb and slowed up as it passed them. A young man at the wheel peered intently at them. Mary held her head high and Etta held hers higher, but Etta was watching from a corner of her eye.

"Miss Curren, isn't it?" called the man in that uncertain tone which proved he was not sure, and also that he was not a brazen masher.

Mary turned at the sound of her name and looked for the first time at the follower, who had drawn his car up at the curb about a half dozen feet ahead of them.

"Billy Gibson!" she exclaimed in surprise and pleasure. "Whatever are you doing in this outlandish part of New York, and how did you happen to recognize me?"

Gibson climbed out his car, and proved to be a tall, agreeable looking youth of about twenty-six or eight, well dressed and personable.

"You are not so easy to forget," he remarked, extending his hand which she took without hesitation.

"This is my friend Miss Henrietta Crosby," she told him. "We thought you were a masher and we were preparing to freeze you good and plenty."

"I saw you looking at Mary down at the corner," said Etta. "We poor working girls have learned to beware of handsome young men in big automobiles."

"What on earth became of you, Mary?" demanded Gibson. "When I came back to New York from the west, a couple of months ago, they told me your mother had died and your address was unknown. You shouldn't have dropped your friends like that, you know."

"I had to go to work," she explained. "Mother left me nothing, and naturally I couldn't live on East Fifty-fifth Street any longer."

"Fancy you being a working girl. What on earth do you do?"

"I am a motion picture actress," she said proudly.

"Good Lord. Say, Mary, that's no kind of business for a girl like you."

"What I always tell her," put in Etta.

Mary flushed indignantly. "What do either of you know about it? Good night, Mr. Gibson. It was nice of you to remember me."

"Oh, come, Mary. Don't high-hat me like this. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I want you and your friend to come for a little ride and have some supper with me in a nice place I know about."

"I'm sorry," Mary began.

"How do you get that way?" demanded Etta. "Here's a gentleman you know perfectly well, wishes to ride us in a fine car

to a fine restaurant and give us the kind of supper we are not accustomed to. If you don't care anything about it, think of me. I'd love to go, Mr. Gibson."

"And go you shall," exclaimed Gibson with a frank and wholesome laugh. He turned to his car and opened the door. "Come Mary, you can't let your little friend go riding with a bold man and without a chaperon. I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings by being surprised to learn that you are a film star. Hop in, like a nice kid."

"It's just the same as being kidnaped," Mary smiled as she followed Etta into the luxurious depths. It was a big coupe and there was plenty of room for two slender girls and a man on the single seat. Gibson climbed up behind his wheel, stepped on the starter and the big machine glided forward smoothly and noiselessly.

"Some boat," exclaimed Etta. "Say Mr. Gibson, what kind of a car is this?"

"It's a Rolls Royce," he replied carelessly.

"A Rolls Royce? Heavens to think I should ever be riding in a Rolls Royce! I'm awful glad we met you, Mr. Gibson."

"Same here and many of them. I've been combing this big city all over trying to locate Miss Curren and this is my lucky night."

"Let's go to the swellest place in town," suggested Etta. "That is if you can stand the gaff, Mr. Gibson. We aren't gold diggers, you know."

"Oh, Etta, be quiet," pleaded Mary, rather ashamed of her friend's ebullience.

"Let her rave," laughed Gibson. "Such innocence is refreshing. The trouble, Miss Crosby, happens to be that we are not dressed and we couldn't get past the door at the Trocadero or the Lido. I'll take you to a nice place where people in street clothes can feed among nice people and listen to good music.

"Some other night?" suggested Etta brazenly.

"To-morrow night if you wish."

"We have an engagement for to-morrow night," said Mary quietly.

Etta fetched her a sharp kick in the ankle but did not contradict.

"Pretty soon, then. I'm going to be a regular hanger-on at your flat. I suppose you have one."

"Rather. One room, bath and kitchenette.

"Are you girls living together?"

"Mary and I are partners in the establishment."

"Let's not talk about us," urged Mary. "What were you doing in the West, Billy?"

"Inspecting father's mines; trying to learn something about them so I can operate them in the dim distant future when the old man kicks the bucket."

"Coal mines, Mr. Gibson?" asked Etta.

"No, copper and lead mines."

"Think of owning mines. Your father must be a millionaire."

"Judging from what he gives me you wouldn't say so."

"Well, a Rolls Royce isn't so bad."

"Here we are at the joint," announced Gibson. "You girls step inside the door and wait until I find a place to park this thing."

As soon as he had slid in his car down the street Etta demanded of Mary:

"For heaven's sake where did you get the gilded youth and has he got a friend? What was the matter with you that you didn't want to come? This is the chance I've been looking for since I first went to work."

"I'm very sorry we met him," said Mary coldly.

"What's eating you. We can use this boy with his Rolls Royce and his millionaire father; for heaven's sake don't hand him the frosty mit. He's a nice clean kid and considering the kind of people you associate with in the movies what can you have against him?"

"He belongs to a period in my life which is finished, and it will be impossible for me to have him as a friend."

"Well, if you don't want him, I want him, and if you are going to throw him in the alley, watch me pick him up, dust him off and bring him in, and set him on the mantelpiece."

Further conversation was interrupted by the return of William minus his expensive Rolls-Royce bric-a-brac.

"Inside, girls, inside. Want to powder your noses?"

"I do," said Etta. "Come on, Mary."

"I'll wait with Mr. Gibson, if you don't mind."

Billy grinned as Etta sailed away.

"Where did you get her?" he demanded. "She's a case."

Mary smiled faintly. "I found her through an advertisement she put in the newspapers for some one to share her apartment and split the rent. She is an awfully good sort, the most generous soul in the world, and she works in Wall Street as a stenographer."

"I can't imagine a girl like you living with a stenographer and working in the movies."

"Don't try, please. I want to forget my previous existence. In a way, this is a much more interesting one."

"But good Heavens, your mother had a brother who is rolling in wealth. You could have lived with his family; no need to disappear and worry your friends half to death."

"Uncle came to mother's funeral, but he was singularly unsympathetic. He told me to come and stay with him while I looked around, in a manner which said as plainly as day: Good heaven, have I got to take care of her all her life? I thanked him for his courtesy and said that I had made other arrangements. I hope I never see him again."

"Well, well, lead me to the gay life. Is that a jazz band I hear tickling my inmost soul?"

It was Etta, a joyous smile on her pert and pleasant face. Billy grinned back at her; she had a fetching way, and her good spirits were irresistible.

He led them with the aid of a head waiter to a table near the dance floor. It was the grill of one of the big hotels where the most famous of all dance orchestras played, but where rules regarding evening clothes were not at all strict.

In the days before prohibition, the grills and roof gardens of New York were the most exclusive of all resorts in the city. Now they are resorted to for supper only by a middle class. Society prefers the quiet and compact little night-clubs where all is elegance and richness and where the proprietor is often a bootlegger.

However the grill was impressive enough for Etta and when she found that the jazz band was that of Perez, the radio and vaudeville band king, her joy knew no bounds.

The place was two-thirds full of a mixed throng which included a number of beautifully dressed parties and as many who were attired as were Gibson's guests. It was a lovely room, very spacious, with a huge oval dance floor of polished maple, surrounded by snowy tables which rose in tiers so that an excellent view of the dancing could be enjoyed from all parts of the chamber. The band numbered about fourteen, mostly saxophones and clarinets, with drums, trombone and a piano. The leader alone played a violin, and mostly he refrained from playing, conducting by a sinuous movement of his body.

His back was turned to his musicians, which enabled him to distinguish friends on the dance floor, to whom he bowed and smiled with rare insouciance.

"Now tell me about motion pictures," said Billy. "I supposed that you would have to go to Hollywood to get work in the films. Are there many pictures being made in New York?"

"An enormous number," explained Mary. "There are several studios, some of them very large. The Famous Players have a tremendous plant in Long Island City, the Fox people have a huge place over on Tenth Avenue, the Cosmopolitan has a big place in the Bronx and up the Hudson, and Long Island has other studios where big work is being done."

"But I thought there was something about California which suited pictures better than the East."

"Originally, there was," said Mary, rather proud to display her knowledge. "During the early days of pictures sunlight was absolutely necessary, and in Southern California they were sure of continuous sunshine. Even the interiors were photographed by daylight and huge stages were built in the open air and all sets constructed without roofs. Now, however, most

pictures are made with artificial lights. They have learned how to get brilliancy that rivals sunlight and they can work twenty-four hours a day if they wish, without any regard for the weather. I worked in a picture in which many exteriors were made in the studio, so, instead of needing daylight for interiors, they now take exteriors by electric light."

"I get you. That disposes of California."

"Not entirely. They have marvelous scenery out there for location stuff, and there are huge plants which cannot be abandoned, but the bright sunlight of California is no longer an essential to making photoplays, so many companies have come east and many new companies have never been west."

"I see a lot of pictures. It's funny I never saw you, Mary."

Mary colored. "I'm not famous yet; it takes time to break in. I have been working off and on as an extra girl and it wasn't until to-day that I got a chance to get out of the mob as they put it in the studios."

"But an extra girl! That's dreadful for you, isn't it? They don't pay much if anything, do they?"

"Six dollars a day, and ten per cent of that to an agent. When I have a chance to supply an evening gown of my own they pay ten dollars a day. I am getting ten dollars just now and shall have three or four consecutive days' work."

"You can't live on that sort of income."

"Never mind my income. Why don't you dance with Etta, she's burning to go?"

"Will you honor me?" he asked, dutifully.

"I was getting ready to break up that argument with a plate," said Miss Crosby. "Come, Valentino."

Mary watched them, smiling, as they circled around the room. Billy was a dear boy, and it was obvious that her decline in the world made no difference to him.

It was good to meet an old friend, to talk to some one who understood. Etta was a dear, but she had her limitations. However, Billy must be made to realize that things were quite different from the old days at Southampton, in Paris and at Palm Beach. If he didn't his mother would bring it to his attention very quickly. The son of Mrs. Rutherford Gibson of New York and Southampton, Newport and Bar Harbor must not become interested in a motion picture extra girl, no matter if she had once circulated on the fringe of the exclusive New York set.

As she mused she felt that curious sensation a woman feels when a man is gazing at her, even if she had not seen him. Mary looked up and saw at a table not far away no less a person than Oscar Sterling minus his spectacles. He was seated with a rather brilliant blonde and another young man. The film director was gazing at her and when he caught her eye, he bowed. She bowed cordially in return, whereupon he excused himself and came to her table.

"I am sure we are acquainted," he began as he bent over her, "but I can't quite place you and I am humiliated that I don't recall the name of such an attractive young woman."

"Don't let it worry you, Mr. Sterling," she smiled. "I am just an extra in the picture you are making. I'm the girl who fainted to-day in the ballroom scene."

His manner changed radically. He became more familiar and rather less deferential. Without asking for permission he pulled out a chair and seated himself. Mary understood this and felt herself unable to resent it.

"Well, upon my word!" he declared. "Of course I didn't recognize you without your make-up. You are making up for lost time to-night. Lots to eat. Who's the good provider?"

"My friends are dancing, Mr. Sterling. I shall be glad to introduce you when they return."

"How about joining you? I see you are two girls and only one fellow. I'm kind of *de trop* at the next table."

"I shall be glad to have you, if my friends do not object. I should imagine that a great director, with so many film stars among his friends would never need to be alone."

"Between you and me, the gang make me tired, and away from the studio I duck them when I can. That's Clarabel Durand over there and while she is a wow to look

at, there is nothing above the bridge of the nose. Besides, that's her sweetie with her."

"Who's the boy friend? He looks as though he might be in pictures."

Mary laughed shortly. "He's not. His name is Gibson."

"I've seen him around the night joints, usually with some darbs. Known him long?"

"Very nearly all my life. He used to pull my pigtails when I was a little girl."

"Well, well. Sure I shan't be butting in on a love fest?"

"Mr. Gibson happened to meet us by accident. You needn't be alarmed."

Without knowing it, Sterling was sinking rapidly in Mary's estimation. On his director's stand he was almost a god, a great executive, a powerful being whose word was law. Across the café table he seemed rather flamboyant and a bit cheap. She thought it would amuse her to contrast him with Billy; and it might annoy Billy.

At that moment, there having been three encores, Billy and Etta came back to the table. Sterling rose and was presented.

"I have invited Mr. Sterling to join us if you don't mind," Mary said. "He is alone and he will square our party."

She purposely did not mention that he was a film director because she wanted to see if he would bring it in, which he did immediately.

CHAPTER IV.

A FILM DIRECTOR OFF DUTY.

"THIS certainly is a fortunate meeting," said Sterling with a heartiness which was not shared by Billy Gibson. "I hardly knew this young lady whom I saw only this afternoon working in my company at the Tonmouth studio. It shows what a difference a costume and make-up causes in the appearance of a girl."

"Oh," said Etta. "Are you a picture actor?"

"Not exactly."

"Mr. Sterling is directing the film in which I am working," said Mary with a quiet smile.

"How interesting," murmured Gibson, in a tone which belied his words.

"And to pay admission to this pretty little party," laughed Sterling, "I am going to be the one to moisten it. You can't get a drink in this hotel, but I always carry my flask."

He drew out a long silver flask and twitched his fingers to the waiter.

"I don't believe the young ladies will take anything," Gibson said discouragingly.

"How do you get that way?" asked Etta. "A little drink will be part of the fun."

"You don't object, Miss Curren?" asked Sterling.

"Very, very little for me," she said unenthusiastically.

"You are overruled, Mr. Gibson," declared the visitor.

"Then I'll order some bottled water," replied Gibson with a pretense of amiability. "Waiter, bring a quart of White Rock and a couple of bottles of ginger ale. Mary, may I have this dance?"

She bowed and accompanied him on the floor.

"What was the idea of ringing in that bouncing bounder?" Billy demanded fiercely, as soon as they were out of earshot.

Now Mary did not admire Mr. Sterling socially, but her professional pride caused her to defend him to an outsider.

"What are your objections to my director?" she demanded rather sharply.

"Why, the way he butted in. The way he flashed his booze without any excuse. I don't like his manners or his appearance, and I am surprised you should be friendly with such a person. Why should he join us, anyway?"

"Please remember that he is my employer, and he can keep me working or discharge me. I am sorry he joined us if he displeases you, but he is perfectly harmless and is only trying to be agreeable. I will appreciate it if you treat him in the same way while he is with us."

"I hate to think of you being compelled to be nice to cads like that just for the sake of a job. Give up the darn business, Mary, and get something more suitable."

"I happen to like the business and I

intend to be successful in it. I have been on my own for four months without any helpful suggestions from you, and I can continue to earn my living without your aid."

He was silent for a moment. "I suppose you are right, and it's none of my affair, but suppose I make it my affair. Chuck it, Mary, and marry me."

She laughed in his face and then grew serious. "I don't mean to hurt your feelings, Billy, but you are only proposing to me because you can't think of any other way to get me out of pictures. You know your parents have other plans for you and you are absolutely dependent on them. Besides I don't love you, and you don't love me."

"Speak for yourself," he said sullenly. "I do love you, and my parents aren't going to dictate my marriage to me. Why should they object to you? Your birth and upbringing are as good as mine."

"Nice of you, old dear, but nothing doing. Now come back to the table and show how nice you can be to the bounding, bouncing motion picture director."

"Well let's break the party up early. Fortunately I can't take him along in my car, it's too small."

When they reached the table they found Etta and Sterling deep in conversation.

"What do you know, folks," declared Etta. "Mr. Sterling is going to make a star out of me. All I've got to do is to lose twenty pounds and learn æsthetic dancing."

"Please don't turn my friend's head, Mr. Sterling," smiled Mary. "We know how long and hard is the road to stardom."

"Not always," declared Sterling. "A few lucky breaks, some powerful friends, and many a girl has leaped into popularity overnight."

"Then make Mary a star, that will please me most," said Etta.

"I am sure Miss Curren will become famous. We made a beginning, to-day, didn't we Miss Curren?"

"You were very kind to me," she said gratefully.

Gibson's eyes flashed as he saw how she had beamed at the suggestion of becoming a star and how kindly she answered the man. But courtesy compelled him to be silent and he tried to make himself agreeable to Etta while Mary continued to converse on studio matters with the director.

"This is a lucky break for her, getting friendly with Mr. Sterling," Etta whispered to him. "He's very powerful in the films and a word from him will go a long ways."

Mary was intensely interested in the way the conversation was developing.

"You have every picture quality," he was telling her. "Among a mob of extras the most attractive girl will fail to draw attention sometimes, and it was good fortune which caused you to faint on the scene to-day. Now that I have had a chance to know something about you, I am sure I can help you along. You have a great advantage over most film girls, you have a good education and you have intelligence. I believe the public is getting sick of beautiful dumbbells, and a girl with a different sort of personality may go far."

"Do you really think so?" she sighed, hynotized by his alluring information.

"Beyond a doubt. I can't do anything much for you in this picture which is two-thirds finished, but leave it to me to get that closeup into the film and keep it in. Then I can show it to the general manager and the casting director and ask him to give you a small part in the next production."

"But that would be wonderful. How can I thank you?"

"Just now, by dancing with me," he said.

The music had started and they rose at once. Billy looked after them with a frown on his open countenance.

"You don't like him very much, do you?" said Etta shrewdly.

"I can't stand him," Billy admitted.

"I don't think he is so bad; a little conceited, but who wouldn't be in his position? Look at what he has accomplished."

"Just spoiled a lot of perfectly good celluloid."

"Don't be a grouch. What have you done in your fair young life to attract a romantic young girl?"

"Not a darned thing. I'm a good tennis

player, a fair polo player, I can swim and box and fence."

"Didn't you ever work?"

"Well, no, not exactly. Some day I'll have to take charge of father's affairs, but there is no urge for hard labor. I'd only be taking the bread out of the mouths of those who need it."

"That's the bunk," with surprising wisdom. "You could be establishing some business that would give a lot of people employment. What a mess you'll make of your father's affairs if you take charge of them with no business experience. I'm in business and I know what I'm talking about. Only the other day the boss came in laughing because one of his competitors had died and his son had taken over the firm. 'We'll wash him up in no time at all,' he said."

"Well, very likely the conditions are not analogous. Let's get out of here when they come back. You say you have a headache and want to go home."

"If I do, can I have another ride in the Rolls Royce?"

"You bet. I'll call around for you tomorrow night."

"It's a deal. Watch me get sick." She made an amusing little moue which caused him to laugh heartily.

Things were not going so well on the floor. From the moment the dance started Mary realized that Sterling would require careful management. There are some men who can insult a girl by the simple motion of embracing her in the dance.

Sterling held her too tight, he squeezed her spasmodically. He brought his mouth too near hers; she could see an evil look in his eye, the beast just crouched to spring.

She was frightened and afraid. She pulled away as much as she could, turned her head so she would not have to look at him, which enabled him to whisper fulsome compliments into her ear. She diverted his attention when she could, by calling his attention to other couples, but she could not prevent him from impressing upon her that he thought her a choice morsel.

His knees kept touching hers as they danced; he swung her too vigorously; all he did was the action on a man determined to get as much carnal enjoyment as possible out of a dance in a ballroom filled with people.

It was Mary's first experience since she had entered the picture business with this sort of thing. Up to the present all had been strictly business, no philandering, no nonsense of any sort. Her beautiful eyes, her graceful figure, her personal charm seemed to have made no appeal to any of the blasé individuals connected with the various companies which had given her employment. And now that she was on the verge of a real chance, she would probably have to lose it or submit to the advances of a person who was ready to take advantage of his position.

But the dance finally ceased, and they returned to Etta and Billy, who had not joined the dancing and were awaiting them impatiently.

Etta had her face screwed up into a knot.

"Darling," she said, "I hate to break up this party, but that film we saw gave me the most awful headache, and, besides, it's nearly one o'clock."

"Then it is time we went home," declared Mary, with considerable alacrity. "Good night, Mr. Sterling; it was lovely to meet you like this. Mr. Gibson will get us to our apartment."

"Oh, come now," protested Sterling. "It's only the shank of the evening. Tell you what we do. Mr. Gibson can take Miss Crosby home, and you and I can hie ourselves to a joint I know where we can get plenty to drink and dance till daylight if we want to."

Mary was dismayed at the suggestion, and Billy opened his mouth to protest loudly, but she saw it and beat him to it. "Not to-night," she smiled. "I am not entirely recovered from my illness of this afternoon, and I need a good rest to be ready for work in the morning. So, some other time, if you don't mind."

Her manner was so final that he had to assent, which he did with considerable bad grace. He insisted upon accompanying them, and only left them when he saw that four could not possibly get into the car. He opened his eyes widely when he

saw the Rolls Royce, and he mentally applauded Mary for having a friend who traveled in such splendor. It made him more eager to improve his acquaintance with her.

He said good night, shook hands warmly with Gibson—a fellow who had a Rolls was a good man to know—waved his hand to Etta, who had climbed into the car first of all, and turned on his heel.

"Of all the cheap fourflushing—"

"That will be all, Billy," declared Mary sharply. "I didn't send for you this evening. You forced me to come out with you, and you have no business criticizing anybody whom I introduced. You are a nice boy, but you have no business associating with motion picture people; we are a different strata of society from that in which you move."

"Aw, come off, Mary. Don't you be standing up for him. You know yourself he is no good."

"I guess he's better than a lot of them, at that," said Etta. "He was getting fresh with you when you were dancing, wasn't he, Mary?"

"He was not. I wouldn't permit such a thing," she answered with fury.

"You couldn't help yourself without making a scene, and you'd die rather than do that."

"Change the subject, please," said the little girl imperiously. and the other two hastened to obey.

Mary was in no mood for persiflage.

"When am I going to see you again?" demanded Billy at the entrance to the apartment house.

"Really, I am so busy—and have so little time."

"Come up any night," invited Etta. "I own half the apartment. You can call on me if Mary is up-stage; and if you just leave your car in front of the house it will improve our standing in this neighborhood."

"All right," said Billy. "I'll be around to-morrow night and take you for a ride, Miss Crosby. If the Queen of Sheba wants to come she'll be welcome."

"Please don't count on me," said Mary, still huffed. "Good night, Billy. Please don't mention me to any of my ex-friends when you see them, and, above all, don't give any girls my address."

"Just as you say, Mary."

"I'm going in now. Good night, and thanks for the party."

"You just stick it out," whispered Etta. "I'll give her a piece of my mind when I get her upstairs."

"Much obliged for the headache."

"Much obliged for the ride. When the car wears out, will you give me the seat cushions. They're lots softer than my couch."

"Take them upstairs with you now."

"When it wears out, I said."

After which Billy entered his car and drove away, very thoughtful.

CHAPTER V.

MARY THE ADVENTURESS.

MARY lay awake a long time that night on her little couch across the room from the cot where Etta was peacefully and happily sleeping. Carefully reared by a widowed mother, she knew nothing of the wild career popularly supposed to be followed by the society flapper. For her there had been no petting parties, no long unchaperoned automobile rides, no swigging gin out of flasks, no necking, so-called.

Like the majority of young girls of the present generation, she grew up modest, God-fearing, sweet, and demure. The literature of the generation, with all its liberal preachings, its justification of promiscuity, of free love, of emancipation from conventionality, had touched her not at all. She looked forward to love and marriage and children just as good women have anticipated it for countless generations.

Etta Crosby had been roughing it on her own for four or five years; she had become sophisticated, astute, and crafty in avoiding the attentions of undesirable men. Actually she would have been far better equipped to enter the life of a motion picture aspirant than Mary. Equally determined to guard her virtue, she would have

known better how to handle rough wooers; she would have known the way to turn aside the amorous with a sarcastic laugh or a slap which would not have awakened animosity, but would have been just as efficacious as the indignation of a girl of Mary's type.

Mary had knocked at the portals of the films with the expectation of winning her way through merit and rectitude. Already she had learned that there was a shorter and easier road which many girls did not hesitate to follow. She had discovered that the requirements for a successful film actress were not too difficult. Surpassing beauty and amazing ability were not essential.

In truth, extreme beauty is rarely done justice by the camera, while most directors prefer to push the performers through a picture by explicit instructions of how to express emotion and what gestures to make rather than permit the actress to interpret a rôle as seems to her most effective.

There were girls as pretty as Mary, and as talented, who had been working as extras for years without attracting attention. She saw persons who were almost illiterate, and whose beauty was inferior to her own sweet face, who were drawing large salaries and winning fame in leading rôles.

She had talked with many girls, had heard them express their opinions. Some of them were perfectly willing to sell themselves for an opportunity to make good, and could not find buyers. Others told tales of losing one job after another because they refused to accept attentions from assistant directors, directors, property men, camera men, and sometimes executives. Many of these girls were obviously lying, and the stories of a few bore the earmarks of truth.

Mary had shut her ears to such propaganda. She believed that she could succeed by perseverance, attention to business, and industry; and she knew there were many women high in the industry who had come to the top by such methods. Lately she had begun to fear that she might be one of those who were continually overlooked, but to-day her chance had come.

Unfortunately, Billy had taken her to a place where she met Sterling socially, and —more unfortunately—he seemed to have become interested in her for other reasons than her talent at acting. What was going to be the outcome? How far dared she push her desire to succeed by tolerating this man, by exerting blandishments upon him, by appearing to like him while keeping him at arm's length?

If he were too persistent, of course she would have to leave the studio and begin again her tramp for employment. A few months ago she would have scorned the idea of using her personal attractions to assist her career. To-night she was almost tempted, so far had her experience influenced her ideals. But perhaps she would be relieved of any decision. In all probability Sterling would have forgotten all about her by morning and would treat her to-morrow as he treated the other extras with rather contemptuous impersonality. And even this would be a bit disappointing, for, if he forgot her, he would do none of the things he had promised in their brief conversation at the table.

How wonderful it would be if he secured her a part in which she had a chance to show something! Then, if he pushed his unwelcome attentions, she could properly rebuke him without injury to her career.

Mary's mother, if she were hovering near her pillow, would have been a bit alarmed at her daughter's state of mind, but she would have been reassured when the girl finally pushed the sheets aside, knelt by her little bed and said her prayers. After the devotions, she crept back into bed and this time fell asleep.

It only seemed a few moments when her alarm clock went off and she rolled out of her bunk half asleep, and ran into the bathroom where the cold shower quickly restored all her faculties. Then she entered the kitchenette and put on the coffee pot. Etta could sleep an hour longer, so Mary ate her own scanty breakfast of toast, coffee and a single egg, then prepared her friend's repast. After which she dressed for the street, and when ready to go out brought out the breakfast on a tray, aroused Etta and wished her good-by.

"Gee, that Billy Gibson is a swell fellow," said Etta rubbing her eyes. "You were a darling to get my breakfast! Do you suppose he will come for me to-night, and will you go with us?"

"I think Billy will show up, but I don't believe I shall accompany you on your ride. See you to-night."

The extras were expected to report at the studio at eight in the morning, which meant that Mary was compelled to crowd into the subway train with the lowest strata of working people. In the early morning hours the down town subway trains carry several distinct grades of workers. Between seven and eight the trains are jammed with factory and sweatshop employees, artisans, laborers and low grade office help. Between eight and eight thirty come the department store employees, the clerks in small stores, the waitresses and the cleaners. Toward nine travel the well dressed multitude of workers in business offices, the clerks, stenographers, department heads who populate the myriad tall office buildings of lower Manhattan.

Between nine and ten a still higher level of humanity takes the subway, the office managers, the store proprietors, the lawyers and professional men, and the mob of well dressed women who intend to invade the great stores.

Mary sat between an Italian laborer who had garlic for breakfast and whose shoes had not been cleaned since the day he bought them second hand, and a colored woman on her way to clean up an office. As she rode, she dreamed of the day when she would ride to the studio in her own limousine, for she was only twenty-one.

The Tonmouth Studio was by no means pretentious; originally it had been a livery stable, and despite the many alterations to suit it for picture purposes there was still a faint delicate aroma of the stable. This was particularly noticeable in the section set apart for dressing rooms for extra people.

Tonmouth was a growing concern, and prosperous for an independent company. Thanks to Sterling and its directorate, it had produced several films which had grossed up six or seven hundred thousand dollars. Grossing a certain amount simply implies that the total of sales to the exhibitors throughout the country over a period of a year or more had reached such proportions. The cost of the picture and the overhead have to be subtracted to find the profit, and the Tonmouth productions cost from one hundred and fifty thousand dollars to two hundred thousand dollars, for Sterling did things in a big way.

Some of the big producing companies manufacture ten or a dozen pictures simultaneously and employ a staff of directors, but Sterling made all Tonmouth productions and he was the big man in the company.

Ten years before he was the leading man of a stock company in a western city. He had drifted into the movies in Los Angeles because he could not make a living in stock. He had a fairly good education, a natural grasp of picture values, a pretty keen sense of what the public likes, and a gift for absorbing the ideas of others.

In two or three years he was an assistant director on a big lot at Hollywood, seized an opportunity to put on a picture of his own which had made a success and then was brought east by Jacob Reingold when that shrewd executive broke with the company of which he was general manager, and came to New York to go into business for himself.

Reingold was one of the first to appreciate that proper lighting made it unnecessary to produce in California. He argued that in New York, there was a multitude of stage actors who could be secured for picture work at a fraction of what it cost to keep a film star in Los Angeles. As the executive offices of all film companies had to be in New York to handle the sale of the product, how much more simple to have the studio a fifty cent taxicab away rather than a couple of hundred dollars and five days' time distance in California.

Sterling had some stock in the company and a salary of one thousand dollars per week. You might criticize the art of his productions, but they sold well, and, compared to many directors, he was a towering mentality.

He had less interference in constructing a film than most directors, and he never had

trouble with Reingold except in the cutting room.

The cutting room is a side of the picture business little understood by the public. When making a photoplay, the producer uses up from three to ten times as much film as the picture requires. An ordinary program picture will run six thousand feet or six reels of film. The big feature pictures such as D. W. Griffith or Douglas Fairbanks produce for showings in legitimate theaters will run from ten to twelve thousand feet.

After the picture is finished, the entire film is run off many times while what is unnecessary is eliminated. Much of the extra footage is repetition, but with this removed, the picture is two or three times as long as it might be. Then begins the removal of unnecessary incidents, and usually they have to cut deeply into the main theme.

If the director is supreme in the production of the film, everybody connected with the management has a say in cutting. The president, the general manager, the sales manager, sometimes the leading salesman, the camera chief, the financial backers all join in the argument. Many times murder is almost done in the cutting room and frequently a fine picture is mangled beyond recognition.

Among those who have least to say in such a discussion are the author and the continuity writer, but if the director is a fighter he can save enough of his essential material to turn out a pretty good photoplay. Sterling dominated his cutting room, which may account for the success of his productions.

The extra people were wanted this morning for earlier scenes in the ballroom. One of the most inexplicable features of making a film, to a layman, is the complete disregard of sequence in filming. The last shall be first and the first last is the rule in studios. There are good reasons for this, of course. Knowing that everything will be shuffled into proper order in the end, the director consults his convenience and the exigencies of the mechanical department of the studio.

There may be half a dozen principals in a film and it may be necessary to engage several hundred extra people for certain scenes occurring at various parts of the picture. It is policy to run off as many of these big scenes as is possible in a few days when the mob is on the payroll, without regard for what may come between. The extras used in the ballroom in this picture were costing Tonmouth a couple of thousand dollars a day.

When Mary, arrayed in her beautiful early Empire creation, her face covered with a white mask of powder and paste, came upon the set she passed within two feet of Sterling who gave her no recognition whatever.

This induced in her a queer mingling of satisfaction and dismay. She was satisfied if he had forgotten her because it would relieve her from importunities, and her dismay was caused by the realization that he probably would forget, also, to further her career in the films.

She found a chair and sat down, and was immediately joined by Tessie Byron, the dark girl who had accompanied her forth from the studio the night before.

"Are you going to faint on us again today?" asked Tessie with a cheerful smile. Mary smiled back, she rather liked this girl, as much as she disliked the snippy blonde of the previous day.

"I hope you don't think it was starvation in the sense of being flat broke which caused me to topple over. I hadn't eaten dinner the night before because I was ill, I rushed away in a hurry without breakfast, and I forgot to bring money enough for lunch."

"I get you, but I suspect you are not rolling in wealth. I have to work pretty hard myself to drive the wolf from my door, too."

"It's a hard struggle, of course, for all of us."

"Yes, and what is it going to get us?" said Tessie bitterly. "A few years of this and then we are not pretty enough to get jobs. Darn it, there go the lights."

The Kleigs may be a satisfactory sunlight substitute in the eyes of the camera, but they are a bane to the studio people. They are not searchlights, but rows of long tubes set in a huge frame which throw a

glare of a greenish purplish hue. Their effect upon the flesh is to obliterate every vestige of color, making everybody look as though they had been dead several days and should be buried at once.

As the camera does not photograph color, this is of no consequence, but the effect upon persons exposed to the lights is to depress them exceedingly. The lights do the human eye no good and there are many cases of partial blindness caused by them, particularly when their brightness is augmented by a score of flood lights, and those particularly trying searchlights known as sunlight arcs.

Despite the terrific overhead and the unusual proficiency of Sterling, there was a long delay before the extras were called, and during this period nothing happened. Sterling was consulting with various people. A horde of mechanicians, and light men, and stage hands were moving about.

The performers hovered around afraid to go too far from the set for fear of being missing when called. They did not dare set foot on the floor, for Abe Blatt had seen that it was entirely repolished during the night, and it glittered like a great sheet of greenish glare ice.

Nobody has been able to explain just why so many hours are wasted on a set. Every other end of the motion picture business has been systematized, but efficiency seems to stop when it reaches the camera. For five minutes of shooting there seems to be an hour of idleness. A few of the women were knitting, but most of them sat with their hands folded, while others stood in groups and gossiped.

Mary did not care very much for the studio girls and for the men, nothing at all. It is the fate of young men who begin at the lowest level in pictures or on the stage to be despised by the women who are doing the same work for the same pay. It seems very unfair, but there is some reason for the attitude taken by the girls.

Despite suffrage and the whole feminist movement the field of endeavor for women is still circumscribed. The stage offers them their only opportunity to advance to positions in which they will draw large salaries and enjoy the luxuries that all human beings, and females especially, desire. Women do not like beautiful men, they prefer strong and exceedingly masculine ones, and prancing before the footlights or posing in front of a camera are not professions which appeal to the dominant sort of males. Men win by achievement, women by being attractive. It is natural for them to pose and dance and preen themselves and the theater and films appeal to a type of girls which is far above the average of the men who are drawn to these trades.

During her short picture career Mary had not spoken to a male extra or actor, and when a tall young man in a striking uniform of green coat and white satin breeches with long polished riding boots and spurs approached her at this moment she did not lift her eyes.

"Miss Currren, I believe," he said. Surprised, she glanced up at him and gasped with astonishment as she recognized him.

"Billy Gibson!" she exclaimed. "Where did you come from and how did you get those clothes?"

Billy grinned, a grin which looked ghastly in the glare of the Kleigs.

"I'm working here," he explained. "I'm an extra man."

"This is a friend of mine, Mr. Gibson," said Mary. Tessie glanced at him and looked away. "How do," she said coldly. "I'm going over to speak to Mona."

Mary gazed at him sternly and indignantly.

"How did you get here, what are you doing here and why the masquerade?"

"As for getting here," he explained, dropping into the just vacated chair beside her, "it was too easy. It cost me twenty bucks to get taken on and fixed up with a costume. What I am doing here is learning to be a picture star. It isn't any more of a masquerade than what you've got on."

"You will kindly leave here at once. I have no intention of having you following me about."

"How do you get that way?" he complained. "You've always told me I ought to go to work. Last night your stenographer friend explained to me that you liked this Sterling guy because he was doing something in the world, so I decided to enter your chosen profession and succeed

Tom Meighan and Doug Fairbanks. Those guys are growing old and somebody will have to take their places."

"If you don't go, I'll report you to the management."

"For what? I'm a poor but honest extra man. If you mean that the atmosphere of a studio is pernicious, then why are you here? I can stand it if you can. It's experience, as a matter of fact. I'm having lots of fun. But the girls aren't sociable. Two or three of them snubbed me while I was trying to find my way around."

"An extra man is the lowest form of human life. If you are going to stay here, don't come near me or speak to me. It would ruin my standing with the girls to be seen talking to you."

"Gee, the poor guys don't look so bad. What's the matter with them?"

"It's no business for a man. Now you go away at once or I'll go, and I'll snub you just like the other girls, see if I don't."

"Well I don't want to injure your social standing. I didn't know the caste system prevailed, even in the movies. So long as all of us fellows are pariahs I don't mind being snubbed. Say, there's my friend Sterling over there, the gay dog of last night. I'll go over and pass the time of day with him."

"Are you crazy?" asked Mary, earnestly. "Do you suppose Mr. Sterling is going to fraternize with an extra man? If he recognizes you he'll throw you out of the studio and if he doesn't he'll fire you for impudence."

"I'm out either way. Then I'll keep away from him. So long, Mary, but remember, if someone gets fresh with you, that Billy Gibson is ready to beat anybody up from the fellow with those horrible lights to old Sterling himself. Imagine that bounder being king of a joint like this."

Billy rose and strolled away, much less satisfied with himself than when he had bribed his way into the studio, but no less determined to see it through.

Mary smiled a little when he had gone. Always she had taken Billy Gibson as a matter of course. Growing up with him as she had done, he had never interested her as a possible suitor, though she recognized his good qualities. But his impudence in following her to the studio and his enterprise in getting taken on as an extra rather amused her and she felt it would be a bit hard to snub him continuously. Probably one day under the Kleigs would be enough for him, anyway.

A few moments later she gave a start of indignation, for a score of feet away stood Billy Gibson talking to Estelle Clairton, the leading woman of the production, and their conversation was apparently quite friendly. Mary could not understand it.

CHAPTER VI.

BILLY MEETS A REAL STAR.

ESTELLE was rather a famous person, a dazzling and petite blonde whose salary was large and whose reputation was none too good. She treated the extra girls "like dirt under her feet," according to one young woman whom she had rudely pushed out of her way. She never even saw the extra men. But the conversation was illuminating.

"What's the idea?" the star had remarked to Billy as he was passing her.

"I beg your pardon," he said in surprise.

"You are the fellow who parked his Rolls Royce alongside of my Packard as I was coming into the studio. I never forget a face."

"I saw you all right," admitted Billy with a grin. "Blondes are my specialty."

"And how about the costume? What are you up to?"

"I'm an extra man, honest."

"You were not here yesterday, and no extra people were taken on. How did you get in?"

"Spent a twenty to good effect."

"I thought so. Who was the girl you were talking to just now?"

"Miss Curren, don't you know her?"

"Of course not; she's an extra girl."

"Well aside from that, she's all right."

"Possibly."

"What a long tail our cat has got," mocked Billy. Estelle took no offense, since she had seen the Rolls Royce. "If she's a friend of yours I must get acquainted

with her," she said. "Are you going to be with us long, or is this only a one-day lark?"

"Depends on how I like it. Will you make me your leading man if I stick?"

She looked at him appraisingly and rather admiringly.

"You might do if you learned to act. What's your name?"

"My studio *nom de plume* or the real thing."

"Come through."

"It's Billy Gibson."

"Son of old Rutherford Gibson, aren't you?"

"Guilty on all counts."

"I knew I'd seen you. You were in the box of Mrs. Hughes at the opera a few nights ago and I saw you playing polo last summer. Listen, Billy, drop in on me at the Blitz, to-night, and we'll see about making a star out of you."

"What's your name?" demanded Billy.

Estelle tossed her head indignantly. "You mean to tell me that you don't know me?"

"Beautiful one, to me you are anonymous. I know you are the leading woman because I heard one of the girls say so, but, aside from that, I must confess I'm a total loss."

"I am Estelle Clairton."

"Think of that now, and I didn't know you. You see I rarely go to pictures. Are you very celebrated?"

Estelle was angry, but decided to conceal it.

"Are you coming to call to-night? I haven't got a thing on."

"I've got a date for to-night, unfortunately, but to-morrow night is free. Hey, what?"

"I have a date, but I'll break it. I rather like you, you are so impertinent."

"My first day in the movies and the star likes me. Ain't I lucky."

"Please don't talk to me any more here," she said hurriedly. "Mr. Reingold has just come on the set. I mustn't talk to extra men."

"Just what Miss Curren told me—said she couldn't be seen talking to me. All right, fair one, I'll evaporate."

Estelle gave him a dazzling smile as he went away. What luck. Billy Gibson, the polo player, the society favorite, and she had annexed him, but she'd have to find this Curren woman and get rid of her. The impudence of an extra girl knowing Billy Gibson!

Billy strolled away rather cockily. So Mary could not talk to him, but the star of the production went out of her way to speak to him, and was breaking an engagement to make a date with him. What do you know about that? The boy didn't have an ounce of personal vanity, and it did not occur to him that his wealth and social position would make any appeal to a celebrated film star.

Those who are in the inner circle take it as a matter of course and do not realize how eager girls of the type of Estelle, who have all that money can buy but whose acquaintance is limited to a certain sort, may be to be seen about with persons among the socially elect. He thought that Mary was unreasonable and Estelle was a good fellow without a jot of conceit or over self esteem, and she certainly was easy to know. Well he'd keep the date, she ought to be good fun, and maybe Mary's eyes wouldn't stick out when he told her about it.

Musing thus, he bumped into a man who shoved him to one side saying: "Get the hell out of my way."

His fist clinched, but the blow was not delivered because the man who had insulted him had hurried on. It was Sterling who had not recognized him and dismissed him as a stupid extra man.

After a half hour's further delay they got the company upon the set and shot a scene showing the turmoil caused by the declaration of war received in the height of the revelry. It was just a mob scene and was rather skillfully worked up with several assistant directors mingling in the crowd and stimulating the action. At its conclusion the extras were herded to their dressing room for a quick change of costume. They were to don rags instead of royal raiment and represent the raging multitude, outside the palace, protesting against war.

The photoplay had no title as yet, but it had been adapted from a novel dealing with life in Vienna during the Napoleonic wars.

The ballroom set occupied half the studio; on the other side the gray exterior wall of the Austrian royal palace had been constructed while the street in front of it had been well simulated, even to the cobblestones.

Sterling finished with the ballroom by several rapid shots of action by the principals around the throne; then waved his hands and immediately an army of stage hands swarmed on the scene prepared to strike it.

Reingold looked mournfully at the work of destruction. It was the most expensive set he had ever built, a truly gorgeous interior; its white and gold walls and balconies, its pillars and cornices had cost him more than he dared to think. Very little of it could be salvaged, only the beautiful velvet hangings, the stairs, and some of the pillars. The rest was lumber, to be repainted and redecorated for some future setting. If only he could have left it standing for some other picture. Nowadays there must be a grand ball and a magnificent cabaret scene in nearly every photoplay. But the space it occupied was even more necessary to him than the set.

He was a fat little man with a bald head and a paunch, but he appreciated beauty, and the sigh which he gave was as much at the thought that such a lovely thing must be razed as what it had cost him.

"What's the matter, Jake?" said a pleasant female voice, and a girl's white arm was laid upon his wrist. "Sweating blood? I don't blame you."

It was Estelle Clairton who was smiling at him.

"Hello, dearie," he greeted her. "It was the finest ballroom ever built in a studio. I hate to see it go."

"Pooh, you can see it in the picture, and think of all the money it will make you."

"Is that so? Let me tell you this business is getting tougher all the time and us independents are being squeezed to the wall. Let me get back what it cost, that's all I ask."

"Don't break my heart like that because I told Madame Renaud to send you the bill for a few new gowns I bought yesterday."

"Oi, oi, more of it! How much were they? No, don't tell me, I've got troubles enough. With the salary I pay you, couldn't you pay for your own clothes?"

"It's against my principles, Jake, with a sugar daddy like you around. Come up and have dinner with me to-night, and I'll break the news to you."

"And the dinner I have to pay for, no doubt," he said with a mournful grin. "What you get out of me is all you think about."

"Quick, I've got three dinner engagements pending. Do you come or do I take one of the regular guys?"

"Oh, I'll be there, but Estelle, have a heart. Don't buy anything else to-day."

Estelle laughed satirically. "When I think how much money you've got I marvel how easily I let you off. Check all your hard luck stories with your hat to-night. I can't be annoyed with them."

He watched her move gracefully away until she was lost in the throng, and he smiled affectionately. She was expensive, but she was worth what she cost.

A film studio is full of incongruities. Estelle wore an evening gown in the style of a hundred years or more ago, yet not so different in cut from those of the present day. She elbowed her way through rough-looking stage hands in shirtsleeves, collarless, some of them wearing dirty caps.

An Austrian officer, brilliant in a white and gold uniform engaged her in conversation, and another principal, in a beggar's rags, joined them and conversed familiarly.

There was a continual banging of hammers, from the ballroom set, the crash of timbers falling on the floor, the buzz of high powered lights being focused upon the palace exterior, and the rattle and rumble of huge frames of Kleigs being drawn over to the new setting.

As Reingold stood musing he was joined by his worried efficiency expert.

"I figure that two solid hours has been wasted this morning at a cost of seven hundred and fifty dollars," said the figures shark.

"The biggest waste is the salary I pay you," retorted Reingold. "You tell me what to do, not how much it costs me not to do it."

"I know exactly what to do. If your director would carefully plan his work in advance, take no experimental shots, drive, drive continuously you could produce your pictures for half the money."

"Sterling would like to hear that."

"Fire him if he doesn't do his work properly."

"Listen, boy," said the president, laying his finger on the chest of the efficiency man. "Lot's of directors I could hire, maybe, that would have system and eliminate waste, but what kind of pictures would they produce? Rotten. The world is full of hard-working, industrious men that will punch a time clock and not make any extra motions, but geniuses is scarce. If I was to hire D. W. Griffith, now, would he be good?"

"Marvelous."

"The craziest of all. When he made 'Way Down East' he shot 900,000 feet of film and threw away 890,000 of it, but, oi, what a picture!"

"That sort of thing isn't necessary."

"Sterling I have to have. So."

"Then if you won't do anything I advise, why do you pay me?"

"I don't know. Because I'm crazy, maybe. I think you are the biggest waste around here. Go into the offices and see how you can fix it so I fire a stenographer and an office boy."

"It's like plugging up leaks in a barrel when the bung hole is open."

"Never mind the bunghole, plug the leaks."

"Yesterday Sterling held up the whole works while he stuck in a scene with an extra girl that fainted; at a cost of five hundred dollars. It wasn't in the book at all, the author told me so."

"The author, is it, the author? I hire you to be efficient, and you talk to an author. Out of my sight."

The efficiency man faded away, and Reingold continued to watch the devastation of his ballroom.

The extras in their rags, procured at great expense by the property man, whose assistants had cut into ribbons several hundred costumes from a previous production, were now pouring out upon the floor. They had even marred their makeup with grease paint and dust to represent poverty and dirt.

Gibson had considerable difficulty in recognizing Mary who had succeeded in making herself a miserable wretch in the last stages of consumption. He had refrained from smearing his own countenance, but an attendant had caught him at the exit from the extra men's room and dabbed him with spots of lampblack.

"This is the life," he exclaimed to her when he found her. "I never knew before the misery of poverty. I don't believe the poorest people could ever look as badly as we do."

"You don't know anything about poverty in New York at the present day, and you don't care," she retorted. "How did you happen to be talking with Estelle Clairton?"

"She's my friend; she's going to make me her leading man pretty soon."

"You better look out. She's no better than she should be."

"Mary," he declared, really shocked. "I am amazed to hear such a statement from a girl like you, brought up in innocence and tenderly nurtured."

"One can be innocent without being ignorant," she retorted. "You don't suppose a girl of that sort won her way on her merits."

"What's the matter with her? She seems to be very nice."

"Oh, go away and don't speak to me about her."

"But I'm sure you are wrong. I am going to take her to dinner to-morrow night, and she wouldn't dare if what you intimate is so."

"Don't ever come to my home again," she said furiously. Then she pushed her way into the crowd and away from him.

Billy whistled softly to himself. Was it possible that the cool and distant Mary was a little bit jealous?

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Things in Plain Sight

By L. M. HUSSEY

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

RATHER fretfully Ralph Pennington stood at the library window staring out at a street that had become, in a few minutes, a shallow, muddy river. Against the window pane the rain dashed with an almost purposeful ferocity. Pennington had forgotten that such vehement storms ever happened at home, and particularly in the city of New York. This primitive downpour seemed more appropriate to the land he had just come from; staring out of the window, he could almost imagine rice fields awash or numberless tea shrubs showing little more than their upper foliage above an earthy flood.

Certainly no one could go out on such a night. After all, the young man told himself, he had no plans for the evening, nor any place to go; but enforced imprisonment appeared odious.

He turned his back on the window. The rain lashed at the pane as if seeking to strike through at Ralph Pennington's shoulders. Beyond the central hall, in the little parlor, he could see a lighted pedestal lamp, and beside it the girl, Clara Lathrop, seated and reading.

Why didn't she read in the library? Because he happened to be there? Did she try to avoid him?

For a second, frowning, he half made up his mind to dislike Clara. Then, smiling almost at once, he understood that he was far from dislike—and if she were a bit shy and aloof to a virtual stranger, that was her nature.

Pennington took a step toward the door under the urge of a partial determination to go in and talk to Clara. When she talked with him she smiled, sometimes with appealing gravity. The young man found pleasant that grave, reticent smile.

But he had barely reached the big table in the middle of the library when Randolph, the butler, appeared in the doorway.

"What is it?"

"Your grandfather asked me to see if you were downstairs, sir. If you're not busy, he'd like you to step up to his study."

Faintly surprised, young Pennington moved toward the stairs. He had imagined the old fellow already in bed. Isaac Pennington kept early hours.

However, at the top of the stairs, Ralph saw the study door open and a segment of light thrown out against the opposite wall.

As he went in his grandfather nodded to him from a lofty backed chair. The old man was smiling. This smile made his face benignant, but the expression of benignancy could not conceal those other interesting qualities of his features.

This was a face that was complex in expression. There was, as has been said, kindness in it, and there was also, as another of his softer characteristics, marked traces of credulity, even superstition. Nevertheless, Isaac Pennington's was not a weak face; there was strength in the eyes and the chin and the sharp, jutting nose.

"Come here and sit down, Ralph," he said. "That's it; be comfortable. A bad night, eh? You weren't planning to go out?"

"No, I had no plans for this evening, grandfather."

The old man tapped with his finger tips on the top of the little table at his side. With partially lowered face, over his spectacles, he eyed the young man while he still smiled, almost cunningly, insinuatingly, Ralph thought.

What was he up to now? Had he decided at last to explain the reason of young Pennington's summons home—why he had recalled Ralph from the plantation, after keeping him there for nine years? For two weeks, ever since his return, the younger Pennington had made efforts to learn why he had been sent for. But the old man, always exhibiting an eccentric grin, had put him off.

Isaac Pennington broke the brief silence.

"Clara downstairs?"

"Yes—she's reading."

"Splendid girl!" exclaimed the grandfather, with sudden emphasis. "I was a lucky old fellow to find her. You see, Ralph, poor old Lathrop was always a harum-scarum fool, and the older he got the crazier he grew. He broke with me when I told him in plain words he'd be an ass to risk his money in that colonizing scheme.

"Didn't see him after that for eleven years. Never saw him alive again, in fact. The poor devil drifted back here to New York and blew out his brains in a little hotel uptown. I wrote you a line about it, you remember? That was a year after I'd sent you out to Punjab."

He drew a breath, nodding.

"And do you know," he continued, "I didn't learn until then that he'd been married, that his wife had died, and that there was a little girl—Clara. No one to look after her. I took her in temporarily. That was a lucky chance for me, my boy. I'd have been a lonely old duffer all these years, with you out there on the plantation."

The young man smiled with a touch of irony in the curve of his lips.

"You didn't seem very anxious to have me come back, grandfather. It took you nine years to send for me. Every time I went to London I thought I'd find word telling me to run over, but your instructions were always—"

Again the shrewd grin cut across Isaac Pennington's face. He stretched out his hand and tapped the young man's shoulder.

"You're a fine lad, Ralph. I'm proud of you now. But you certainly were running wild in college. Too much money to spend, and too little responsibility. I had

to do something. I had to get you out of the way—and find out if there was any stuff in you. Well—there was. After the first year or two nobody could have done better with the plantation than you have. I believe—"

He paused an instant, and in that instant of pause the lively shrewdness which had dominated his face was replaced by that curious expression of superstition, of credulity, which was also one of the qualities of his features.

"I believe," he went on, "that the power that saved my life was also beneficent to you, my lad. Eh? Vishnu! You know the story—"

A swift frown mapped young Pennington's forehead while an impatient curl raised his upper lip a trifle. He spoke quickly.

"Certainly I know the story, grandfather. I suppose every native and half the white men in western Punjab know the story, too. Surely everybody that's been to Sibi Ghazi knows it—everybody that's been there and seen the gifts you've made to the temple and the quantity of fat priests leading a fat life."

An angry flush was mounting the old man's cheeks. Seing this, the grandson tempered his voice a little, making, coincidently, a soothing gesture with one hand.

"I don't want you to be angry, grandfather. But ever since I went to Sibi Ghazi and heard that tale I've wanted to talk to you about it. I suppose if a man saved from drowning believes half his life that some one pulled him out of the water, he wouldn't like to have an outsider come along and tell him that it was an accident, the tide, that threw him up on dry land. That's about your case and how you probably feel toward me right now.

"But you were only at Sibi Ghazi a short time, and I've been there nine years. I've seen the poor devils of our natives sweat and starve while those high-caste, sanctimonious boys in the temple have been living fat all the while off them and off your generosity. And then last year old Dr. Radcliff, the English doctor who was there—"

Isaac Pennington interrupted with a scornful laugh.

"Radcliff! If I'd stayed in his hands you'd have no grandfather alive to-day, my boy!"

"Well, I'm not so sure of that, grandfather. Last year Radcliff came back to Punjab, and I had a long talk with him about your 'miracle.' He made the case perfectly plain and cited plenty of parallel cases.

"You went out there to Sibi Ghazi in middle life, about the time when you should have begun to take things fairly easy. But you worked like a half dozen men getting the first tea plantings established. Strange environment, hot climate, unaccustomed food. As Dr. Radcliff explained it, up shot your blood pressure.

"According to him, he even warned you what might happen. And it happened. A ruptured capillary in the brain, a clot—and you were as good as out of the world. But as Radcliff showed me, those cases don't always end fatally in a hurry. A patient may lie unconscious in coma for weeks at a stretch. That was your case. When the servants carried you out one night and powwowed over you in the temple, that had nothing to do with your recovery. In fact, they might have killed you by moving you. You were due to recover, grandfather. Naturally, I mean. All the while you were unconscious—a couple of weeks, wasn't it?—the little blood clot was being reabsorbed."

In the old man's face the first angry flush had subsided. An indulgent expression succeeded it, and he listened to the words of his grandson as an elder attends the pratings of an inexperienced child. Slowly he nodded his head.

"There are mysteries in life, my boy. Everything is not cut out so plain as these Radcliff fellows want you to believe. I was all but a dead man. And a power intervened. The priests at Sibi Ghazi call it Vishnu. Maybe there's another name. Whatever the name, they brought it to help me, and they saved my life.

"We won't say anything more about that. Eh? We'll not talk about that any more. We'll talk about Clara. She's down-

stairs reading, is she? A fine girl! What do you think of her now? You've been here two weeks, Ralph. What do you think of her? You like her, don't you, lad?"

Young Pennington smiled at the whimsical eccentricity of his grandfather's questions.

"Why—certainly. Yes, I like Clara."

"How much, now? How much do you like her, boy?"

"But, grandfather, that's not an easy question to answer. I haven't been here long, and don't know Clara very well. To a certain extent, I've found her rather—shy."

"Shy? That's nothing. Why shouldn't she be—under the circumstances? Any fine girl would be."

"Grandfather, I don't quite understand you."

Old Pennington laughed, almost gleefully.

"I guess not, Ralph, my lad. I've kept my plans pretty close because I wanted to have you here at home first, wanted to make sure you were the sort of boy I thought you were. You haven't disappointed me. It's time you know my plans now. Clara knows a little about them—maybe that's what makes her a bit bashful, eh? You see, lad, I've planned that you and Clara shall be married—"

Ralph Pennington restrained a sudden impulse to laugh. To himself his position did seem, at that moment, ludicrous. Nine years before he had been sent away to his grandfather's plantation as a rather bad boy in need of chastening. Faced there with notable problems and realities, he had put aside his boy's prankfulness for the man's pleasure of winning through difficulties.

After the passage of a few years it began more and more to be said of him that he was one of the most successful planters in all northwestern India. There, in the end, he became a man of consequence and esteem.

And now, very amusingly, he thought, he confronted a story-book grandfather who still viewed him as scarcely more than a child, and who from this indulgent viewpoint had very considerately arranged all the details of his life, even including such a trivial detail as his marriage to a virtually unknown young woman.

However, eying Isaac Pennington, the younger man did not laugh, although he could not withhold the smile on his lips.

"This is a trifle surprising, grandfather. And, seriously, did I understand you to say that Miss Lathrop—Clara—has been told of our—our impending marriage?"

"How's that? Yes, of course. That is to say, I haven't told her everything. Just as I haven't told you everything. Tomorrow morning I'm going to have you meet me down town at the office, and then we can get down to the details. Yes, of course, I mentioned the matter to Clara. I told her that you were coming home and that I planned you two would—"

"And what did Clara say to that?" interrupted Ralph.

A touch of annoyance puckered the old man's forehead with a frown. It was as if his grandson had asked a quite irrelevant question.

"What did she say? Let me see, now. I don't remember just what she did say. I don't remember that she said anything."

II.

A LITTLE later Ralph Pennington found himself descending the stairs in a wondering mood. As he reached the middle landing he could see that there was still a light in the small parlor opposite the library. Clara Lathrop apparently remained there reading.

For him she had taken on, within a few minutes, a naturally augmented interest. She had grown suddenly much more colorful and much more mysterious. She was no longer a somewhat aloof young woman with no particular relationship to himself.

For them both a third person had already established a relationship the details of which were, in the outcome, unpredictable. Certainly these past few weeks, under cover of her reticence, she must have examined him minutely. She must have appraised him thoroughly—and what, after all, had she been thinking all the while?

Did she secretly agree in the plans of the amusing old matchmaker upstairs? Was she an adventuress? Or was she, in her secret heart, a bit frightened—and perhaps a bit indignant? Recalling her face to mind, the latter surmise seemed to Pennington the juster.

He had now reached the bottom of the stairs, and he turned directly toward the parlor. He had developed the habit of confronting every problem immediately, and by the force of that habit he found himself walking into the room and looking into the eyes of Clara Lathrop, who raised hers quickly from her book.

"You'll let me interrupt you?" he asked. "I wanted to have a little chat—"

She smiled her curious, grave smile.

"You don't interrupt in anything very important. This rainy night there was nothing else to do but read. Won't you sit down?"

Pennington chose a chair on the opposite side of the table.

"I was just upstairs talking to my grandfather. He gave me some very surprising news."

Her face was lowered again; her hands lay in her lap, and so in the lamplight she looked appealingly peaceful. She could strike, he thought abruptly, many attitudes of unconscious grace. But he went on resolutely.

"Maybe I'm a bit brutal, Clara; but I may as well say right out what I've learned. My grandfather just gave me the interesting news that you and I are to marry one another."

This startling intelligence seemed not to stir the girl in the least. She retained her agreeable composure; her hands still lay in her lap, and her face was inclined forward toward the floor.

Pennington had expected at least a stifled gasp, an exclamation. Faintly nettled, he went on:

"And I was also told that you knew all about it."

Now her eyes were meeting his own. It was a searching glance, as if she inquired as to his innermost mood. Under the scrutiny of those wide, brown eyes his tendency to be slightly angered and his impulse to speak a little flippantly evaporated. He saw that she was nodding her head.

"Then he really did tell you!"

"Yes, he told me—part of his plans."

"And for Heaven's sake, what did you think?"

She surprised him by a low, quick laugh.

"Surely you needn't have asked that question, Mr. Pennington—Ralph. Naturally I've been wondering what might happen!"

Now Pennington himself laughed, and a kind of camaraderie between these two seemed to have been established at once. He found Clara's aplomb, her cool self-mastery, wholly delightful.

Then coming back to the problem, he frowned and in perplexity he rose, strode once or twice the length of the table, standing at last with his eyes directed upon the girl.

"This is a confounded mess," he said. "Grandfather took me by surprise this evening. I had no chance to tell him that his plans are perfectly absurd. Of course I'll be obliged to tell him that—but it won't be easy to make him understand."

Looking at her, he was startled to find a sort of taunt in the smile with which she met his words.

"It won't seem at all strange to you," she remarked, "that I've wondered a good bit about you during the past month. Of course I've wondered about you before—but particularly the past month. I've wondered just what sort of person you might be."

For an instant she paused. Her lips recaptured, in that interval, the singularly taunting smile.

"I know now," she concluded, "that actually you're a very, very frank person!"

"I—I don't understand, Clara. What is it you mean?"

"Mr. Pennington, didn't you tell me just now that you considered yourself in a dreadful fix? And doesn't that mean plainly enough that you wouldn't, under any circumstances, consider marrying me?"

During the course of a second or two the

young man stared at this disconcerting girl rather like a surprised schoolboy, his mouth open a trifle.

Then he began to laugh. "You make that out of my words, do you? Well, if I did say it, I take it back immediately. I—"

"My gracious! This isn't a proposal, is it?"

They were both laughing now, and with a quick movement, an unexpected litheness that Pennington found even a little disconcerting, the girl was on her feet and extending her hand.

"I'm going upstairs and to bed now," she said. "Good night, Ralph. We do have a silly kind of a problem in front of us, don't we? The best thing we can do is laugh at it for awhile—and see what happens."

Speculatingly, and with a fixed smile, Pennington watched her as she left the room. He listened to the light patter of her feet ascending the stairs. Wasn't she, after all, beguiling? And what would, in the end, happen?"

For the first time in several years he felt that he was not quite master of the events of his life. But even now he could not guess how forces utterly outside himself were working to take those events yet further from his hands.

III.

At the age of seventy-eight Isaac Pennington was still active in the control of the importing house that bore his name. Most of the detail was in other hands, of course, but his supervising eye almost daily reviewed the activities of his subordinates.

For many years he had clung to the old-fashioned offices above the warehouse. Finally he had been persuaded to move into a conventional office building, and thither he journeyed nearly every morning to spend an hour or two at his desk.

The offices of Pennington & Co. were on the second floor, and could be reached, therefore, almost as conveniently by the stairway as by the elevator. When, in the morning, Ralph Pennington entered the building his impatience would not permit him to wait for a cage that might be several minutes in descending from the upper stories. He chose, instead, to run up the stairs.

As he entered the offices he found Mr. Brighton, the office manager, standing near the gate talking to a visitor. That thin-lipped, ascetic-looking man smiled at him somewhat sourly.

"Mr. Pennington is waiting," he called.

Ralph continued toward the door that bore his grandfather's name in small gilt letters. This door opened directly into the main office, but Isaac Pennington's private office could also be reached by a door opening into the outer corridor which was, however, customarily locked.

The old man was seated at his old-fashioned desk. The roll top was lifted, and the pigeonholes were crowded with old papers and ancient memoranda. At the sight of these Ralph smiled briefly; his grandfather still clung to certain outmoded practices, and plainly enough there were documents and memoranda which he would not trust to the modern files in the outer office.

"Well, grandfather," began Ralph, "you slipped out of the house early this morning. When I came down for breakfast they told me you'd already gone to the office."

As on the evening before, the old fellow grinned—that pleased grin of one who has concluded a shrewd piece of business.

"I was a little restless, my boy. Yes, I slipped out early. Now, let's see. We'll go back to last night. We were talking about Clara last night, weren't we? Maybe you had a chance to say something to her about our talk, eh?"

The young man nodded.

"I spoke to her after I left you—"

"Good. And what did she say, lad?"

"Well, it seemed that you'd also given her an idea—"

"True enough, Ralph. That's true. I gave her an inkling. She's a very fine girl. Now that I know for certain what sort of a boy you are, I know that I've done the best thing for you both. You'll be glad of it, both of you."

He nodded rapidly, emphatically, meanwhile chuckling a little. Watching him, a flush of irritation caused Ralph Pennington's shoulders to stiffen, his jaw to set a trifle.

What right had his grandfather to interfere so outrageously in his life and in the life of Clara Lathrop? The proposal that they must marry because he wanted them to marry was wholly absurd. Ralph felt that he should have spoken last night—but he could speak now. He could say at once that in the somewhat important matter of selecting a wife the choice, he thought, should lie entirely with himself.

Nevertheless, Ralph Pennington said nothing. No single restraint withheld his words. He did not fear his grandfather; he was not covetous of anything he might gain by complying with the old fellow's wishes; indeed, he had no powerful reason not to speak freely. Perhaps, although he did not study out his reticence at the time, a thought of the girl herself, Clara, restrained him.

Old Pennington was fumbling with a document under his hands.

"This is it, lad—my will. You want me to read it to you? Well, I won't read it now. We'll do that some other time. It will suit you now to know the main provisions, eh? That's what I wanted to tell you this morning. Following up our talk that we had last night.

"Speaking briefly, I've willed my properties in this way: if you and Clara are married within sixty days following my death, the bulk of my estate goes to you both. That's clear, my boy? Now, then—otherwise, if you and Clara aren't married within that limit, there'll be a moderate annuity for Clara, an interest in the Sibi Ghazi plantation for you, and nothing else, and the bulk of the property goes in perpetuity to the temple at Sibi Ghazi. There you have, in a few words, what I've written here."

He waited for Ralph to speak, but the younger man remained silent.

"What do you have to say now?" asked Isaac Pennington. "You've talked with Clara. What do you have to say?"

Ralph fumbled for a reply. Again a scarcely fathomed reticence prevented him from making an irritated denial of his grandfather's wishes.

"Give me a little time, grandfather," he faltered. "Yes, I have talked with Clara. But after all, our talk wasn't very—very intimate. Really we don't know each other yet. We're hardly more than names to each other. Give me a little time, then."

A few minutes afterward he found himself walking out of the office, nodding to George Brighton, the rather disagreeable office manager, as he passed through the gate.

When he reached the street he hesitated a moment before coming to a decision to return home.

In his mind there was a vague notion that Clara Lathrop might be at leisure, that they might talk together again. In a measure he looked forward to that possible conversation.

Reaching the house he glanced quickly into the library and found it empty. He was about to go upstairs when the butler appeared.

"A telephone call for you, sir."

Ralph took up the receiver.

"This is Mr. Ralph Pennington? Mr. Brighton speaking. I have very unhappy news for you, Mr. Pennington. Concerning your grandfather."

"What is it, Mr. Brighton?"

"About five minutes after you left his office I had occasion to consult your grandfather. I knocked on his door. Mr. Pennington didn't answer and I took the liberty to open the door. He was seated in his chair, but I saw at once that something had happened. The fact is, I found your grandfather dead."

"Dead!"

"Unhappily, yes. The police surgeon has just been here and makes a provisional diagnosis of apoplexy."

"I'd better come down at once, Mr. Brighton. I'll be there as quickly as possible."

Astonished, half unbelieving, the young man replaced the receiver on its hook. For an instant he stood near the instrument, bewildered, unable to direct his next step. Then, seeing Randolph in the hall, he called to him.

"Is Miss Lathrop upstairs?"

"I believe she is, sir. In her room."

"Will you call her, please? Tell her that I'm down here and wish to talk to her immediately."

IV.

He had given, in a few words, the ill news to the girl and was hurrying back now to the offices of Pennington & Company.

When he entered he found, naturally enough, the customary routine of business wholly suspended. The clerks and stenographers were clustered together in whispering groups. It was a moment before Brighton appeared; he came toward young Pennington with a grave face.

"A terrible event, Mr. Pennington," he murmured. "And there have been developments since I telephoned you. I'd better tell you about these before you—go in *there*."

His head jerked in the direction of the private office.

"You see," he continued in his somewhat rasping voice, "when I discovered Mr. Isaac Pennington I telephoned right away for his private physician. But I couldn't reach him. Then I didn't know just where I could get a doctor quickly down in this part of town and I did what seemed best—called in a police surgeon. He made a very hurried examination and said it looked like a case of apoplexy. After that we got the coroner's office on the phone and right after I talked to you the coroner's physician came in. He made a very startling discovery."

"What do you mean, Brighton?"

"An incredible business, Mr. Pennington! When the coroner's physician loosened Mr. Isaac Pennington's clothing, slipped off his coat and collar, he found at once that apoplexy was not the cause of death! Not a natural death at all! Mr. Isaac was strangled to death by pressure on the windpipe!"

"Strangled! Murdered?"

Brighton nodded slowly.

"That seems impossible, but it's absolutely the fact!"

"It's very hard to believe such a thing, Brighton. I was shocked, but I wasn't surprised when you telephoned me and said that my grandfather had died of apoplexy. Years ago, when he was a younger man, he suffered an apoplectic stroke—it's been remarkable that he lived to an old age. Apoplexy—that seemed natural enough. But strangled to death—I can't somehow—"

For an instant Ralph paused before questioning the office manager. Swiftly there had come into his mind their recent talk over the telephone.

Ralph remembered now Brighton's statement that he had found Isaac Pennington dead scarcely five minutes following his own departure from the private office. That meant, if the coroner's physician had not made some incredible error, that he had barely reached the street before some one had entered his grandfather's office and put an end to the old man's life.

"Brighton," he asked, "who went into my grandfather's office after I left? You recall the time I left. I passed you at the gate."

"Exactly, Mr. Pennington. Just at that moment I was talking to a salesman from an office supply house. I had some letters in my hand right then that I was waiting to take in for Mr. Isaac's signature. You went out, the private office door was under my eyes all the while, I said good-by to the salesman and walked directly toward that door. I doubt if five minutes had passed. Maybe not more than three or four minutes.

When Mr. Isaac didn't answer my knock I opened the door and walked in. Your grandfather was still at his desk, but slouched down in his chair. There wasn't any signs of a struggle. So far as I could see nothing on his desk was disturbed. And certainly no one had gone into the private office between the time you left and the time I opened the door."

"That means," said Ralph, slowly, "that so far as you know I was the last one to go in or come out of my grandfather's room?"

Brighton lowered his eyes. He nodded, once.

There followed a few seconds of complete silence. Within that brief interval young Pennington strove to comprehend fully the alarming situation in which he now found himself.

However, the very fact of his grandfather's murder was still incredible—even the mere death of that old gentleman whom, a little while earlier, he had left chuckling over his plans, remained fantastic.

"If you care to go in with me," Ralph said at last, "I think I'd like to—"

Brighton anticipated his words and led the way toward the inner office.

Entering, Ralph saw that the body of the old man had been carried to a davenport upon which, during business hours, his grandfather sometimes rested or napped. It was startling to view him motionless there, when little more than an hour past he had been vivaciously alive. Yet more amazing was the mystery of his end.

Ralph crossed to the couch and stared at the waxy face. He felt tears coming into his eyes.

Here was the countenance of one who had, in an old man's eccentric way, been always good to him. Once more Ralph found it beyond reason that any person could have held Isaac Pennington in sufficient enmity to put an end to his life.

He was startled out of his thoughts by Brighton's voice.

"You'll notice," said the office manager, "that I've taken the liberty to lock your grandfather's desk. I don't doubt there'll be an investigation by the district attorney's office. I think you'll agree with me it's best to keep things just as they were found."

Ralph nodded. His eyes meanwhile searched the room. Abruptly he strode to the other door that gave exit to the outer corridor.

"That's always kept locked," volunteered Brighton.

Pennington tried the knob; as Brighton said, this door was locked.

"You have the key?"

"No, sir, your grandfather always kept that key. I seldom knew him to use that door, however."

"Unless you've been mistaken, Brighton, it must have been used this morning by some one—between the time I left my grandfather and the time you found him dead at his desk. I say unless you've been mistaken. And it's hardly likely that any one slipped into my grandfather's office from the outer office right under your eyes. It's very unlikely that you were mistaken."

Brighton remained silent. And Ralph Pennington understood the significance of this silence, understood that it implied a discreet accusation.

Once more his own intolerable situation was borne in upon the young man. There could be no doubt that in Brighton's mind, in the minds of every one, he was implicated. Circumstances seemed measurelessly against him. It came to him suddenly that he would very probably be arrested.

That might, he perceived, very well happen. At once he determined to forestall, if he could, the first step of official inquiry. It was evident that the district attorney, if he acted with anything of his customary promptness, would summon the nephew of Isaac Pennington before many hours had passed.

Realizing this, Ralph formed the immediate decision to visit the district attorney on his own initiative.

He turned to Brighton.

"There's nothing I can do here at the moment," he said. "Things will naturally have to be left as they are until after the inquest. Call me at home when there's need to reach me. If I'm not there, leave your message."

V.

Out of doors, however, there came to him a memory that caused him to modify his primary intention. He had purposed to go at once to the district attorney's office. Instead he beckoned a taxi, giving the address of the big house that was now left, by the sinister event of this morning, without a master.

In fact, Ralph had remembered Clara Lathrop's face as he had hurried away from her after delivering the ill news of Brighton's message. He recalled her swift tears and her sudden, sincere distress.

Beyond question this girl had loved his grandfather. At home she must be waiting in painful suspense. And in spite of the claim of his own interests—yes, in spite of his own obvious danger, Ralph found it impossible to continue the pain of that suspense. He would go to Clara at once.

In the hall he had scarcely given his hat to Randolph when she came toward him swiftly from the library. He took her arm and led her back to the quiet room lined with gravely bound books.

"You're courageous enough to stand a shock, Clara?" he began. "Yes, it's true; my grandfather is dead. But it's worse than was thought at first. The police surgeon made only a brief examination. Death wasn't natural—when the coroner's doctor arrived he found that out immediately."

"You don't mean—"

Ralph Pennington nodded.

"Yes—it seems impossible to believe. Some one slipped up behind him as he sat at his desk and brutally strangled him. It was done adroitly, by a powerful man. There are scarcely any marks on his throat. In fact, they weren't visible until his collar was removed. Strangled him, killed him in a few seconds no doubt. There wasn't a sound."

That litheness in the girl which Pennington had noted before again revealed itself. Her body, a moment ago drooping, became vividly taut. Cat-like she was out of her chair and facing the young man.

"If I could find the beast who did it!" she cried. "If I could find the beast—"

The somber frown, cutting Ralph Pennington's forehead, caused her to pause.

"I think you'd better realize certain circumstances," he told her, slowly. "There's only one person to be suspected. Just now at least—"

"One person! Who?"

He tapped his breast.

"Me!"

"What do you mean!"

"Clara, you may as well have the incriminating details from my own lips. Of the two ways to enter my grandfather's office only one was open. I was the last person known to be there with him. I came out and was seen to come out by Brighton. All the while Brighton had his eye on the door.

"A few minutes later he went in through that door and found my grandfather dead. And let me see—what else? Oh, yes, there usually has to be a motive, doesn't there. Well, in this case the motive exists also.

"I am a beneficiary under my grandfather's will. Do you understand, Clara. Isn't the case perfectly clear against me—circumstantially? Won't everybody be quite ready to believe in my plain guilt?"

Again, watching her, he saw the quick fires emerge from her dusky eyes that contrasted so ardently with her pale face. She gestured brusquely, angrily. For a startled second he thought that Clara Lathrop was about to be the first to accuse him in words. She began to speak.

"Yes! I understand you, Ralph. You will be accused. And perhaps every one will believe in your guilt. With one exception! I know how much your grandfather loved you and how proud he was of you. Through him I know *you!* And no matter what the circumstances are, I'll *never* believe that you were guilty!"

Ralph felt these words tingling in his ears like the vibrations of some exquisite music. The ardor of the girl's confidence stirred him deeply. And he understood the completeness of her loyalty and how fully she would proffer it now and later.

He sprang to his feet; impulsively he seized her slim hands.

Words of appreciation had seemed ready on his lips, yet now he found it impossible to say them. Wordlessly he held her hands, looking into her eyes. For several seconds, in this significant immobility, they stood facing each other.

He saw a color come into her cheeks, and her eyes dropped. She withdrew her hands; she turned a little aside.

It was yet another moment before Ralph could speak.

"You'll forgive me if I hurry away now?" he asked in a low voice. "I wish I could stay with you. There are many things we have to say to one another. But I must go now. I'm going immediately to the district attorney's office. I'll get back here at the earliest moment. And if there's any news for you before I can get back, I'll call you, Clara."

She was again drooping in her chair. Ralph saw that her face was cupped in her hands and he knew that she was crying.

How difficult it was not to comfort her now by a caress. Yes, he desired to touch

her hair soothingly, to put an arm about her. A moment before she had seemed vividly alive and lithely strong. Now she was grief-stricken and pitiful.

After a second of hesitation he turned, without saying anything further, and left the room.

VI.

As he faced Ralph Pennington, Mr. Richard Dennis, the rather youthful district attorney, was wondering whether opportunity had just now knocked at his door.

Here was a case that was certain to attract the utmost of popular curiosity. It exhibited every feature that the most abiding sensationalist could crave. An aged and wealthy business man had been strangled to death in his private office. A few minutes before the discovery of his death the victim's grandson, a beneficiary under the victim's will, had been observed to leave his office. Nor had any other person been seen to enter that office after the grandson's departure.

An ideal case to bring the talents of a public prosecutor before the popular eye! By the successful prosecution of such a case more than one man had risen to higher office.

Nevertheless, Mr. Dennis was puzzled and a bit uncertain. He deemed himself a judge of men and somehow, having listened to the volunteered story of Ralph Pennington, he could not quite persuade himself that the young man before him was really a very cool and a very audacious murderer.

"Mr. Pennington," he said, "I certainly appreciate having from you all the details of this unfortunate affair so promptly. I'm going to be frank with you. You've seen your own position and I'm free to say that I see it much as you do. There is no question but that all first suspicions implicate yourself."

"That means—"

"In practical terms it may not mean anything. Again, it may mean that I'll be obliged to order your arrest. Right now I'm not going to arrest you for two reasons. First, since you're here and available as a witness I think the coroner will be willing to hold his inquest this afternoon. And I want the coroner's verdict. Second, I don't believe you're going to run away. Assuming hypothetically that you are guilty, you can gain nothing by disappearing. I'm reasonably assured that you'll be on hand if I need you."

Pennington nodded and arose.

"Just a minute, Mr. Pennington. I wat to get in touch with the coroner. Then I can tell you if you'll be needed this afternoon."

The young man waited and then learned that the inquest would be held, as Dennis imagined, during the afternoon. As he left the district attorney's office he walked studiously, with lowered face and a frown cutting across his forehead.

In the corridor he did not at first notice a young man who glanced at him hastily, then advanced smiling, a hand extended. This young man had almost collided with him before Ralph, a bit startled, heard his name and raised his face.

"Recognized you, old boy! In spite of the fact that you've grown up!"

Pennington found himself gazing into the countenance of a man who, in spite of an indubitably boyish air, was probably of his own age.

For an instant the face remained strange. Then, out of the confused recollections of his college days that a term of years in Punjab had rendered remote, he remembered Lawrence Harrowby.

"Harrowby! By George, it's good to see you! What are you doing here, old man?"

"What am I doing here, Penn? If you hadn't dropped off the earth you'd know the answer to that. I'm a member of the bar. I'm a qualified practitioner of law. How's that? You look so confounded surprised! You never expected me to settle down enough for such like dignities, eh?"

The two young men laughed.

"Well," continued Harrowby, "since you've come back to life again you've likely found out all about me, Penn. Consequently, there's no use pretending. No, I don't represent the Standard Oil Company or the Bethlehem Steel Corporation as yet. I could stand a little more practice and generally I have plenty of time on my hands. Now then, Penn, you asked me a question

and I'm going to ask you one. What are *you* doing here?"

A rather acid smile curved Pennington's lips.

"I just came out of the district attorney's office. I came to find out whether or not I'm to be arrested for murder."

"Please say that again, Penn!"

Without vouchsafing an immediate reply, Ralph Pennington stared speculatively at his old friend.

Within a few minutes he had recalled much of Harrowby. He remembered him now as one of the most high-spirited of his own group at college. He recalled how Harrowby's undoubted brilliance as a student, so far as that ability could gain him college honors, was continually offset by Harrowby's disposition to romp.

And he saw now that Harrowby, as a practicing attorney, was doubtless thwarted still, to a degree, by a similar rompish disposition. Nevertheless, at bottom he was clever, brilliant even, and undoubtedly solid. Impulsively Ralph grasped his old friend's arm.

"Harrowby, if it's true you have some time on your hands, I'll give you a case that will take up at least a part of your leisure. What I said just now is a literal fact. I just went into Dennis's office to find out if he proposed to lock me up as a suspected murderer. And I'm not at all sure that he won't. One thing's certain—I'll need a lawyer. If you want my case I'm offering it to you now!"

"Look here, Penn," cried Harrowby, "you do seem to be serious after all. Can I really help you? What in God's name is it all about? Let's get out of here. Let's run over to my office—or better yet, go to some quiet place where we can have lunch and talk? What about it now? Give me some idea as we're trotting along!"

Arm in arm the two young men moved down the corridor.

VII.

News of the murder of Isaac Pennington appeared, of course, in the early afternoon papers. However, the coroner's investigation was held so promptly that no more than a handful of the merely curious were present at the inquest.

Harrowby attended with Pennington, who gave his evidence and answered all the questions put to him. Naturally, he was the chief witness, although the testimony of George Brighton was of virtually equal importance.

While Brighton, with a characteristic dry consciousness, made it perfectly plain that the grandson of old Isaac Pennington was the last person seen to enter the office of the murdered man, Ralph became curiously aware of a stranger present among the spectators.

His consciousness of this stranger was so acute that for a moment it triumphed over his interest in Brighton's damaging testimony. Seated at a table with Harrowby, the young man realized he was the object of an intense scrutiny. The eyes that examined him emerged distinctly from an otherwise uninteresting blur of faces.

They were narrow eyes, set deep, cunning and a bit piggish. The man himself was porcine, and yet for all the fat heaviness of his face and shoulders he did not suggest a sluggish nature.

Ralph Pennington had no prior recollection of this fat-jowled face. It was indubitably the face of a stranger. Then why did a stranger examine him so intently?

It was almost as if those cunning eyes sought to penetrate the mysteries of his inner nature, estimate his fiber, sum him up as a shrewd adversary sums up his antagonist.

Yes, Ralph told himself with a start of surprise, a certain overly fleshy stranger among the spectators appeared to be computing minutely the qualities of Ralph Pennington.

A second later he shrugged away the notion with the comment that his nerves were getting a trifle sensitive. And why not? He had passed through twenty-four hours of amazement and ordeal, beginning with that surprising conference with his grandfather the night before.

Certainly he did not consider himself easily upset in his nervous equilibrium—but the present situation, and the experi-

ences of the immediate past were quite sufficiently perturbing.

He turned to Harrowby. And he saw that Harrowby, with a faintly puzzled frown, was looking at the face from which he had just removed his own eyes.

At once Ralph's first notion returned. He lightly tapped Harrowby's arm.

"Did you notice the same thing, Harrowby?" he whispered. "Did you notice how that fat fellow's been watching me? You found it—peculiar?"

Harrowby nodded.

"Yes," he returned. "We'll speak about it when we're outside. I wouldn't want him to guess now that we're talking about him. Or have taken any notice of him."

A little later the inquiry was ended and the inevitable verdict rendered. Isaac Pennington had met his death at the hand of a person or persons unknown.

What would be the next movement in the processes of the law? As Ralph Pennington arose his shoulders visibly stiffened. Would a detective from the district attorney's office be waiting to take him into custody as he stepped out into the corridor?

He left arm in arm with Harrowby. Rather to his surprise he was permitted to pass unmolested to the street.

For a few minutes both young men had maintained a silence.

"Yes!" Harrowby exclaimed, abruptly. "I did notice him, Penn. Now—I wonder why the devil Creighton Downey was present at the inquest? And what was his very pointed interest in—"

"Who's Creighton Downey?"

"Our fat friend who was looking you over as if he couldn't decide whether you were his long lost brother or his worst enemy. Our friend who looks rather like an impossible cross between a fox and a sow."

"So you know the fellow, Harrowby? Who is he?"

"Happens to be a professional brother of mine. Yes, he's a lawyer. He must have very little to do lately."

"Look here, Harrowby, this fellow—what did you say his name was? Downey? This fellow Downey stuck right out from the rest of the crowd. The rest of them were there for the sake of a sensation. Every one of them was watching me closely enough while I gave my evidence. But he was doing more than watching.

"He was trying—well, I might say he was trying to—to figure me out. That's the way it looked to me. Maybe I'm wrong. A sort of silly idea after all. I never saw the man before in my life. What possible interest could he have in me?"

Harrowby shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know, Penn. But don't let's pass him up. It's more or less remarkable that we both noticed him and both got the same impression. What possible interest does he have in you? If we can't answer that can we answer this one: who murdered Isaac Pennington? And why?"

Harrowby paused. In his customarily indifferent face there was an unwonted expression of determination. His hand gripped Ralph Pennington's arm.

"I'm not going to try to kid you, Penn. You *are* in a more or less dangerous fix. They may jail you at any time. And they've got some nasty circumstantial evidence. The whole business is so confoundedly dark right now that I consider we've been in luck this afternoon. I mean I consider it lucky that both of us noticed Downey staring at you during the inquest. That's a sort of a straw to snatch at. We need a few straws. In this instance maybe we're foolish. I don't know—"

"But what about this Downey, Harrowby? What do you know about him?"

"Not many facts; a good bit of gossip that one hears in law offices. He's been a member of the bar in this State for many years. But he hasn't practiced here regularly. He goes and comes. Traveled a whole lot—to out of the way places. Not much of a reputation among reputable men."

Made indifferent to their surroundings by the interest of their conversation, the two young men had been walking slowly uptown. Then Ralph paused impatiently at the next street corner.

"Where are we bound for, Harrowby? We don't seem to be headed anywhere in particular."

"No, we haven't been. And it's getting late. I suggest that you come up to my

rooms for an hour and then we'll go out together for dinner."

Ralph hesitated. Finally he shook his head negatively.

"I don't think I will. Somehow, I believe I'd like to be alone for awhile. I've a lot to think about. And God knows, I hope you'll be able to do some thinking too, old man. We'll put our heads together in the morning. At your diggings or—"

Harrowby interrupted him with a laugh.

"Oh, I think Dennis is going to let you sleep in your own bed to-night, Penn. His best chance to lock you up was right after the inquest. He hasn't yet decided what he'll do. And perhaps you're right. We may be able to do some straighter thinking this evening if we muddle over this thing separately. Here's luck until to-morrow, Penn. Good night, old fellow."

They clasped hands; Ralph stood watching for a moment as Harrowby disappeared in the crowd that was growing momentarily more dense as shops and offices emptied their employees into the streets.

At last, stepping to the curb, he hailed a taxi by waving his stick. As he gave the address to the driver the thought came to him that he had not been wholly frank with Harrowby.

After all, he was hurrying home alone, but not with the wish to be alone after he arrived there. It was abruptly stimulating to realize that before him stretched an evening inevitably to be spent talking to Clara Lathrop.

A warmth suffused him as he recalled her words of stanchly loyal confidence. No matter how dubious the circumstances, no matter what accusations might be brought against him, she affirmed her utter belief in his innocence.

He could see her face again, her passionately tensed body as she made this stirring affirmation. And now, with the first instant of leisure wherein to recall that scene he found the remembered face and figure profoundly moving.

A faintly audible gasp involuntarily escaped his lips. This was the girl his unhappy grandfather had proposed as a wife for him!

The young man's eyes stared out of the flecked cab window, out at the ceaselessly shifting pattern of vehicles and human figures in the street. However, at the moment, he saw nothing. The intensity of his inner consciousness absorbed the powers of his external senses. A whisper escaped his lips.

"I—I wonder!" he said.

VIII.

THEY dined together in the dining room that seemed now oppressively somber, curiously empty. Old Isaac Pennington's chair at the head of the table was unoccupied.

Clara barely touched the food that was put on her plate and it was obvious that she had spent the afternoon in anxiety and grief.

"How terrible!" she murmured again. "How terrible! I'm only a little happy for one thing, Ralph."

Pennington questioned her with a glance.

"That they've still left you free."

He nodded.

"Glad of it too. Harrowby isn't specially optimistic about the length of time I'll still have my liberty. But after all, I hope you won't worry too much over that, even if they do decide to accuse me—the shock of this thing is quite enough for you to bear, Clara.

"I know perfectly well your feelings for my poor grandfather. I know the poor old fellow loved you and I know you loved him in return. You've lost him. That's hard enough. Any more burden to your spirit is unfair. In the end they wouldn't be able to do anything to me."

He found her dark eyes meeting his own.

"Do you expect me to be indifferent to what may happen to you, Ralph?" she asked suddenly.

The abrupt question stirred him with an emotion that was, he thought with swift surprise, almost joyous.

"It touches me, Clara—yes, it makes me suddenly happy to realize that you're *not* indifferent! I remember what you told me a few hours ago. A few hours? It seems so much longer than that! It seems a long time ago, and yet what you said is very near and clear. You said you believed in

my innocence. You said that no matter what any one else believed—"

Her eyes dropped; her face was lowered. Then, with one of her lithe, disconcerting movements, she was on her feet. Her hands moved in a gesture of passionate fatigue.

"I can't stay here any longer. I can't sit here eating dinner as if—as if a dreadful thing hadn't happened. Forgive me, Ralph. I can't even talk to you just now. I want to go upstairs to my room. I want to be alone!"

Pennington arose and watched her leave the room while he experienced a genuine emotion of compassion.

He sat a little while at the table and then wandered into the library.

He found himself toying with the books on their shelves, staring out of the window, pacing back and forth the length of the room. Randolph looked in and inquired if he were in need of anything.

"Nothing, Randolph. There's no reason for you to stay up. Go to bed if you like."

A little later he heard Randolph's subdued step on the rear stairs. The house had become very quiet.

The young man glanced at his watch and found that the hour was past twelve. And suddenly his nervous tension that he had imagined would keep up many hours longer was replaced by an intolerable weariness. He snapped off the library lights and moved slowly toward the stairs.

Above, in his bedroom, Ralph mechanically pulled off his coat, his necktie and collar. Then on the edge of the bed he sat fumbling with his shoe-strings.

How hot the room was! Before his tired fingers contrived to untie the laces he stood up and walked to the window. A faint breeze was blowing in over the roofs of adjacent houses.

It was tainted with the odors of the city, the smoky smell of the streets. But Ralph stood there, staring out at nothing, in fatigued immobility.

Then almost before his ears identified it his muscles reacted to the vibration of a brief, scarcely discernible noise.

His muscles tensed apprehensively; his body stiffened. What was the sound? Was it in the house or out of doors? It had seemed, for the brief interval of its duration, like a human cry. A woman's voice stifled in the beginning of a scream? Or perhaps only a child in one of the houses across the court calling out in its sleep?

"My damned nerves are getting down to a confoundedly fine edge," grunted the young man. "I'd better get to bed. I need sleep."

He turned toward the bed—and was at once tense again with another noise, now indubitably within the house.

There was the brusque, inarticulate exclamation of a man, and a thudding sound of something that had fallen.

In another moment Ralph was at the door. He flung it open. The light had been extinguished in the corridor. In the darkness he hurried toward the stairs. And near the head of them he nearly catapulted himself over the prostrate figure of a man sprawled on the floor.

Pennington clutched at the wall and regained his balance. Behind him, a little further back in the hall, were the light switches. His fingers groped for the row of mother-of-pearl buttons. Simultaneously he pressed two or three. Lights flared upstairs and down.

At the head of the stairs lay the figure of Randolph, attired in a dressing gown, his eyes closed and a trickle of blood running sidewise across his forehead.

IX.

As he stooped over the motionless figure, Ralph was measurelessly relieved to see the butler's eyes open. They opened as if Randolph were emerging from a profound, a drugged sleep.

The man blinked and looked, for several moments, stupidly unaware of his surroundings. Then a full consciousness came back to him abruptly. He sat up quickly, while one hand went toward the gash in his forehead.

"What happened to you, Randolph? What is it?"

The butler clutched Ralph's arm.

"Give me a hand, sir, for a moment. That's it. I guess I can stand all right now. They didn't do me much harm. A nasty

crack over the head. Have you got a revolver, sir? Just a minute till I get mine. Fool I was to come out of my room without it!"

He stumbled down the hall and returned a second later clutching his weapon. This he extended to Pennington.

"You'd better handle this, sir. I'm still a bit unsteady. I'll follow you downstairs. But they're probably out of the house by this time!"

"Just a moment, Randolph. What are we looking for? Whom do we expect to find downstairs?"

"My God, Mr. Pennington—this thing has dazed me. We'd better look first in Miss Lathrop's room. The three of them came out of there! And I'm afraid—"

Ralph was rushing toward the room at the end of the hall before the butler's fear was uttered. He came into the dusky room, but luckily his swiftly searching fingers found the switch immediately.

As the light went on his eager glances showed him at once an empty room. A chair had been drawn to the window; the bed had not been occupied, for the cover was not yet drawn back. Had Clara Lathrop been sitting at the window when—

Randolph stumbled through the door.

"For the love of Heaven, man! Tell me at once, in a few words, what's happened!"

"A scream, sir. I heard a short scream. It sounded like Miss Lathrop's voice. I was just on the point of turning in. I slipped on my dressing gown and opened my door quietly. I saw that some one had turned out the night light in the hall.

"That startled me, sir. I was about to go back for my revolver when I heard a scuffling at Miss Lathrop's door. I tiptoed into the hall and made my way down, hugging the wall. I saw the figures of three men ahead of me. And I'm fairly certain, sir—yes, I'm almost positive, that one of them was carrying Miss Lathrop in his arms. It was dark, but I'm fairly certain. I came up with them at the head of the stairs when one of them—"

Ralph was out of the room and running downstairs. Enraged, blind to caution, he flung himself into the library and switched on the lights.

The room was undisturbed and empty. As he emerged he met Randolph at the foot of the stairs. Above, shrilling questions, appeared the figure of the frightened housemaid.

"Come with me into all the rooms, Randolph!" commanded young Pennington. "Hurry, man! Pull yourself together!"

Successively they visited the small parlor, the dining room, the pantry, the kitchen. Nothing was disturbed, nor were any intruders or traces of intrusion found anywhere.

The windows were closed and locked, as Randolph had left them earlier in the evening. The rear and front doors were both closed and both locked. The door to the cellar was bolted.

"Upstairs again!" cried Ralph. "They're still in the house!"

As he bounded up the steps the housemaid clutched at his arm and began to scream. He brushed her aside. With Randolph at his heels he went successively into each room, those on the second floor and those on the third.

This swift search yielded nothing, and Pennington found all the rooms no more disturbed than he had discovered the rooms on the first floor. Clara Lathrop was gone, three intruders had carried her off—and there was no visual evidence of intrusion nor any evidence as to the fashion of the trio's coming and going.

No visible evidence save the bleeding gash on Randolph's forehead that had been caused, probably, by the blow of a revolver butt. At the top of the third floor stairs, panting from the rush of his search, Ralph Pennington stood staring at the disheveled servant.

"Not in the house!" he muttered. "How did they come and how did they get out?"

For another instant bewilderment claimed him. Then a clear fact etched itself in his mind with acid delineation.

Clara Lathrop had been brutally carried off! He had no notion who could have seized her or whither she had been taken. On that instant of sharp understanding his entire emotional nature was claimed by an impotent rage.

His fingers dug painfully into the palms of his hands. And at the same time the terrible knowledge of his helplessness made him long immoderately for intelligent counsel.

"Get downstairs, Randolph!" he commanded. "Go to the phone and call the police. I'm going out myself for other help and I'll probably be back before the officers arrive. And you might as well call a doctor to have a look at that cut."

As Randolph hurried down to the telephone Ralph ran to his bedroom to don his coat. He did not trouble to resume collar and tie. Lacking the formality of neckwear he ran out to the street looking impatiently for a taxi.

One came coasting to the curb and Ralph was on the running board before it halted. To the driver he shouted the address of Lawrence Harrowby, urged speed, and then sat stiffly erect as the vehicle jerked forward into the street.

At the apartment where Harrowby maintained his chambers a sleepy elevator boy was aroused to carry him to an upper floor. Would Harrowby be in bed? It did not matter; Ralph would pound on the door until his friend awakened.

However, Harrowby was not in bed and he answered the first blow of the bronze knocker. Looking out from the doorway he stood an instant staring at the astounding spectacle of a collarless Pennington whose haste left him, for a moment, without breath for words.

"For the love of Heaven, Penn. What's happened to you?"

Ralph managed now a staccato utterance.

"Get your—hat. Come along—with me, Harrowby. An infernal business. Clara—gone. Randolph knocked on the head. Three—of them. Not a sign. Hurry, man!"

The incoherency of these explanations and commands conveyed at least one clear fact to Harrowby's mind. Pennington was in need of him and wanted his company at once.

Content to understand later, he acted on the primitive fact already apparent, seized his hat, grasped Pennington's arm, and walked with him toward the elevator.

By the time they reached the street Ralph was launched on a more or less comprehensive story.

X.

A POLICE sergeant and a patrolman in uniform and two detectives in civilian attire had come, clumped about the house and poked noses into every corner, asked questions relevant and irrelevant, shaken their heads with somewhat unconvincing sagacity, and had gone, leaving two young men seated in the library staring at each other.

They had indulged in a quantity of talk that seemed as fruitless as the investigations of the police. Or mainly Harrowby had talked while, for the most part, Pennington sat claimed by the emotions of his first impotent rage.

At that hour he indulged in no introspection. He did not ask himself why he should react so robustly to the girl's brutal carrying off.

To a degree, of course, his reaction was conventional. It was the emotional response of any decently sympathetic young man to an outrageous event. But Pennington's anger measured larger than this quite natural anger that might come to a relatively disinterested spectator.

Indeed, he was not disinterested and had he been capable, at that time, of examining the nature and origins of his feelings he would have understood clearly the extent to which this girl Clara had seized upon his imagination during the past forty-eight hours.

With muscles flexed by his sullen and helpless rage, Pennington stared at the face of his friend without receiving more than a blurred impression of that familiar countenance. Then he was startled out of his angry preoccupation by Harrowby's abrupt, exultant cry and the almost goatish leap of that young man from his chair.

For a few seconds Harrowby paced tigerishly up and down the room. As suddenly as he had fallen to this swift pacing he paused in front of Ralph and clapped a hand on the latter's shoulder.

"Things in plain sight are the things hardest to see!" exclaimed Harrowby. "But, by George, I'm certain I've suddenly

caught one perfectly obvious fact out of this infernal muddle. Penn, the persons or the person that strangled your grandfather to death also carried off Clara!"

"How do you know that, Harrowby?"

"I know it! I know that much as certainly as if I'd seen the actors in both events. But I don't consider myself very brilliant for seeing the truth. It's taken me three or four hours to understand that much—and anybody should be able to see it in less than five minutes."

Ralph lifted his hands and let them fall: a gesture heavy and helpless. "I don't seem to be able to think, Harrowby. I don't see anything myself."

"Look here, Penn. The connection came to me just now as I was trying again to muddle through the problem of how those desperadoes got into this house and got out again. I've been edging around the solution of that difficulty for more than an hour, and somehow never getting to the heart of it.

"Actually, I'd begun to think of occult means. And of course that's all rot. They were a trio of good, substantial villains that crept in here to-night. They weren't ghosts, and they didn't slide through the walls. It was no spook that gave Randolph that crack over the head."

Pennington nodded.

"How did they come in, then? We did not find a window unlocked, we did not find a door unbolted. Everything was perfectly tight, just as Randolph left it when he went upstairs.

"Were they hiding something in the house? I hardly think so. I hardly think so because from my look around and from the questions I asked Randolph and the housemaid, there doesn't seem to be any likely place for three men to hide for a number of hours—three men who might have sneaked in some time during the day—and remain undetected for so long a time. I'm perfectly convinced that these fellows made their entry not very long after you'd gone upstairs. They'd probably been watching on the outside for quite a time—waiting for the lower floor lights to go out."

Again Pennington nodded.

"That's probably right, Harrowby. Yes, I think that's reasonable. But how did the brutes get in? I don't see the problem solved."

"Because it's too easy and too plain. I thought of fifty involved, difficult and absurd solutions before the one that a child should see. Tell me, Penn—how do you usually let yourself into the house at night?"

Half beginning to understand, Ralph stiffened in his chair, leaned forward eagerly, and stared up into Harrowby's face.

"You let yourself in, I suppose," continued the latter, like any other respectable gentleman—through the front door, with your latchkey. These brutes were certainly not respectable and by no means gentlemen—but on this occasion they borrowed that much from the habits of honest men. They opened the front door with a key, walked in, went upstairs, carried off their victim, went out by the front door, and thoughtfully closed it after them. If Randolph hadn't been unconscious at the moment he would have heard them go out—or seen them."

A heavy frown erased the eager attention from Pennington's face.

"Impossible, old man. No common burglar's skeleton key could open the lock on my grandfather's front door. You aren't dealing with a common lock. Go take a look at it. You've carried simplicity too far."

But the little smile that quickly cut across Harrowby's face again arrested his attention.

"You've forgotten, Penn, what I said a moment ago. I didn't say that I'd found only the way these fellows let themselves in and out; that's no more than a minor discovery. The big thing is, I've connected them with the murder of your grandfather. And now I'll make you see!

"Penn, when the coroner's jury examined your grandfather's body yesterday afternoon, do you remember the little pile of personal effects, taken from his pockets, that was also part of the exhibit? I gave all the items a glance. His cigar case, his wallet, a purse, a few dog-eared letters that he'd been carrying about in his pockets, a small penknife—and one of those leather carriers for keys that nowadays have taken

the place of the old-fashioned keyring. I gave a glance to that, too. It had hangers for eight keys. And there were only seven keys on the clips.

"That didn't mean anything to me at the time. A man might very well have a key carrier with spaces for more keys than he customarily used. Right now, however, I'm convinced that one key—the key to this house—had been slipped off its clip by the man who committed the murder.

"And the fellow knew what he wanted. Some time or other, in preparation for the second crime, he had investigated the possible ways of getting into this house. He had sized up the lock on the front door and was able to recognize among the others the type of key that would fit it.

"Considering the type of lock, he didn't have to be particularly astute. In one thing, however, he was astute: he preferred to take the key he wanted rather than the carrier with all its keys; which would have been just a little simpler. What he guessed was that a single key might not be missed, at least immediately, whereas the disappearance of all the keys might very well be noted by any one with a knowledge of your grandfather's effects.

"Don't I convince you yet, Penn? Look here—is it necessary for me to point out once more that not a window and not a door in this house were disturbed? Nothing was forced, nothing broken. How else did the three get in if not through the front door? And how did they get a key to the front door—they had to have a key—if not from your grandfather?

"Nobody's picked your pockets, I suppose. I imagine you still have your key. Well—within a few hours we can settle the question. I'll take a little trip over to the district attorney's office and ask to have another look at those pocket effects of your grandfather. You'll lend me your latchkey for comparison? If there isn't one like it among the seven found on your grandfather, my case is as good as proved."

XI.

SUDDENLY it seemed to Ralph Pennington that the astute reasoning of his friend, although based almost wholly upon a sequence of conjectures, was entirely and devastatingly accurate. That meant—

He had no need to complete the obvious inference in words. Springing out of his chair, he rushed toward the door. But Harrowby was on his heels and, just as he reached the hall, seized his arm.

"Where are you going, Penn? What's the matter with you?"

"Going! Do you think I can sit here listening to you in cold blood? If what you tell me is true, do you know what it means?"

The young lawyer still maintained a determined grip on Ralph's arm.

"It means," continued the latter, "that Clara Lathrop is in the hands of beasts that may finish her at any moment, just as they finished my grandfather. It means that the situation is a thousand times worse than I imagined. I must get out of here—I must do something!"

"Right, Penn! But not just at this second. Where are you going to go? And what are you going to do?"

Like a trapped animal, Ralph looked up and down the hall, from side to side. Then his tightened muscles relaxed and his shoulders dropped helplessly.

"True enough," he muttered. "I do not know where to go, Harrowby. I don't know where to look. I'm like a blind man trying to fight an army."

Harrowby nodded sympathetically as he led his friend back to the library.

"Yes, it is pretty awful, old fellow. So far as I can see, there's only one fortunate sequel to this new piece of business. It's very unlikely, now that Clara Lathrop has been kidnaped, that Dennis will have you locked up for the murder of your grandfather. This new event shows outsiders at work and makes the case against you mighty weak. And I'm particularly glad of that. You'll be needed as a free agent.

"One thing I can tell you to put your mind a little at rest. You may have thought of it yourself. Just at this moment I haven't any notion why the girl was carried off. I don't know much about her, and you don't seem to know a whole lot more. But I've fairly convinced myself

that whoever carried her off also had a hand in the death of Isaac Pennington. And that makes me sure that she wasn't taken out of this house for the purpose of putting an end to her life. If that was the object, the job could have been done without the difficulties of a kidnaping. Isn't that much perfectly clear, Penn?"

Ralph did not answer. He had slumped in a chair, his head bent forward wearily. Following a glance at his figure, Harrowby laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Penn," he went on, "we can't do a thing for three or four hours. But after that we may have a great deal to do. And I'll need your help. With what's before us we both must snatch a little rest. I'm going to run back to my rooms and go to sleep for a couple of hours; and I want you to go upstairs and get into bed. I'll telephone you later in the morning."

It seemed almost a sin to sleep at such a time, to find any rest while Clara was still in unknown hands capable of any intolerable act—and yet Ralph realized that he must yield to the excessive exhaustion of his body. The strain to flesh and nerve of the past hours had been emphatic. He was utterly wearied.

Hearing the door close on Harrowby, he stumbled toward the stairs, made a lurching ascent, and in his room dropped immediately upon the bed. He closed his eyes. The oblivion of sleep was instant.

The room had been wanly illumined by the early dawn when his eyes first closed. He opened them later to find a vibrant sunshine in his chamber. Out of the forgetfulness of sleep his mind emerged immediately into the harsh consciousness of catastrophe. Disheveled, he sprang up from the bed and ran to the door. At that moment he found Randolph coming up the stairs.

Randolph bore the evidence of last night's adventure in the way of a neat square of gauze and plaster on his forehead. Otherwise he was unchanged, and his deferential imperturbability had returned to him.

"Has any one called me?" demanded the young man.

"No, sir. Two men—I think they were detectives, sir—came from the district attorney's office. They looked over the house. I told them you were sleeping, and they decided not to disturb you. They had a look in your room, but you didn't awaken, sir."

"No telephone message from Mr. Harrowby?"

"No, sir."

"And—and no news, Randolph?"

Solemnly the butler shook his head.

"What time is it, Randolph?"

"It's nearly noon, Mr. Pennington. If you'd like—"

"Nearly noon! I've slept that long! I must get out of here immediately."

It was necessary for him, in fact, to visit the undertaking establishment from which the funeral of Isaac Pennington was to be held, and there to make the final arrangements for the burial. He was thinking, however, less of this melancholy obligation than of the wild chance, once out on the streets, of learning by some means the whereabouts of Clara.

For the girl a profound compassion and a very deep tenderness entered his heart. He admitted these emotions; he made no effort to conceal them from himself. He tried to crush from his thoughts those speculations that concerned themselves with the distressing things that might have happened to her since she fell mysteriously into unknown, brutal hands. He tried to comfort himself by a faith in the beneficence of his own destiny and hers. She was still unharmed—and he would save her!

Shaved and dressed and refreshed by his unbroken sleep, Ralph felt a renewed vigor throughout his body. Pondering the problem of what course action might take, he reached the undertaking establishment and made the necessary arrangements. Leaving this place, he walked thoughtfully along the street.

Out of a confusion of thoughts and speculations that darted into this or that channel, his mental processes emerged at last to a close consideration of the final talk with Harrowby.

He reviewed the conjectural links of his friend's reasoning whereby the murderer

of his grandfather and the kidnaper of Clara were connected.

What had happened to Harrowby? Why hadn't he telephoned? The important question of the latchkey—had that been settled?

Abruptly impatient, Ralph decided to make an independent inquiry. He would visit the district attorney's office and determine the important point for himself. Decided upon a course of action, not only did his physical self begin to function, but his mind, too, became swiftly clear. One of Harrowby's assertions sounded again in his ears:

"Things in plain sight are the hardest things to see!"

And if this was applicable to the way the kidnapers had entered the house, didn't it apply quite as aptly to the way the murderer of Isaac Pennington had entered the inner office?

That highly pertinent problem remained unsolved. Certainly Dennis, the district attorney, had not yet given it very careful attention, since until now Dennis had been half persuaded of the grandson's guilt.

Ralph's pace became slower, while his forehead knotted itself into a profound frown.

Was it reasonable to suppose that with George Brighton's eye constantly on the door any one had slipped into Isaac Pennington's office by the customary entrance? Ralph shook his head. Very well, then—had any one been hiding in the office; had there been a murderous interloper present throughout his interview with his grandfather?

Again he shook his head. There was no place for a man to hide in that office. The couch—a single possibility—was much too low for a man to wedge his body between it and the floor.

Ralph found himself nodding swiftly. The locked door, the door to the outer corridor! That was the obvious place of entry for the murderer—and, therefore, the last place to be thought of.

But who had possessed the key to that door and who had found the means to enter and leave it without exciting suspicion?

"Things in plain sight are the hardest things to see!"

Harrowby's phrase seemed now astoundingly illuminating. The vision vouchsafed by that phrase caused Pennington's pulses to leap—and his slow, thoughtful pacing of the street became suddenly a purposeful progress toward the building that houses the offices of Pennington & Co.

Ralph entered the lobby and inquired of the elevator starter the office of the building superintendent. Pointing down the corridor, the man replied:

"There's a small room right beyond the stairs. If he's in at this time, you'll like as not find him there. Or if you wait, he's sure to show up."

It was with a sense of high expectancy that Ralph Pennington turned the knob of a door bearing the legend "Superintendent," entered, and found himself confronting a middle-aged man with the face of one perpetually harassed by trifles.

XII.

THE building superintendent, under whose direction was that hidden army of scrubwomen, janitors, mechanics, boiler-tenders, and so forth, who ministered to the physical comforts and appearance of the edifice, sat at a somewhat disordered desk drumming with his finger tips on the glass plate. His hair was a little tousled, as if he had been running his fingers through it in a moment of despair.

"I'm Mr. Ralph Pennington," began the visitor. "I'm the grandson of Mr. Isaac Pennington, who—"

The superintendent was on his feet, extending a sympathetic hand.

"Terrible thing," he said. "Terrible thing to have happen in our building. Dreadfully sorry about it, Mr. Pennington. I haven't looked at to-day's papers. Is there any fresh news?"

Ralph evaded the question.

"You're rather late getting to your morning paper," he commented.

The superintendent shook his head solemnly.

"I don't want to seem to speak flippantly," he said, "and I've a world of sym-

pathy for you, Mr. Pennington. But do you know, an occasional tragedy like your grandfather's death is only a sort of exaggerated instance of the perpetual tragedy of a place like this. Believe me or not, Mr. Pennington, but every day of my life I deal in catastrophes. Little catastrophes, understand—but they're like the drops of water you read about in those old-time torture chambers!"

Ralph smiled, and his eyes examined with increased curiosity this singular man.

"I seem to have come in on you," he said, "at a rather unfortunate moment."

"Oh no!" exclaimed Clarke, with the weary gesture of a martyr. "You find me as I always am. In fact it's no more than a little thing this morning. Three nights ago we had the worst possible breakdown in the engine-room. I was up for a stretch of thirty-six hours. I thought there might be smooth sailing for a few days at least.

"But I should have known better. This morning I find that the night man in charge of the second floor didn't report for duty and so not a hall or an office there got even halfway attention. I've done nothing but answer kicks from tenants all morning. And he was a good man—been with me for three months and going very steady all the time. Got along very well with the scrubwomen in spite of the fact he was colored. They sometimes don't like that. But I had mostly colored women working with him. He wasn't an ordinary darky anyhow—I think he must have come from Haiti or San Domingo or one of those places in the West Indies. He had a kind of a queer way of talking English.

"And now he walked out and—will you pardon me while I get this telephone message. Some office manager on the second floor raising merry hell because the trash wasn't carried out last night—"

Ralph was distinctly glad of the interruption and he hoped that the irate office manager might keep the tormented superintendent at the telephone for several minutes. This was not because of any needlessly cruel wish that the superintendent's difficulties might be augmented—but Ralph himself was in need of a few minutes in which to gain sure hold of his composure.

He had an impulse to shout, to leap into the air. He was exultant. He was conscious of the increased frequency of his heart-beats. Within a few seconds of conversation this loquacious and comic superintendent had virtually confirmed the sudden conjecture that had come to him on the street.

Who would have the key to an unused office door save an employee of the building. And who, in office hours, with the corridors full of transient visitors, could enter such a door unnoted and unremembered save an employee, a porter perhaps, with mop and bucket and blue uniform?

Such a man could come and go in the corridors and no one would take the least note of him. Such a man could use a key on any door and no passerby in the hall would remember the event.

And this morning the man in charge of the second floor, the floor on which the offices of Pennington & Company were situated, had failed to put in an appearance!

Clarke had turned from the telephone.

"Just as I thought," he said, in a depressed voice.

"Well," remarked Ralph, "I'm sorry for your difficulties, Mr. Clarke. This man of yours—haven't you his address. Maybe you can get in touch with him, get him back again."

"That won't help me any. That won't stop the complaints for work that was left undone. Anyway I'll find some one else during the day. No, I can't get him back again. Don't know where to look for the beggar. I sent around to the address he gave when he first came here, but I find he hasn't lived there for several months. A low-lived rascal!"

"Well, Mr. Clarke, you've got a great deal on your hands and I'll not take up any more of your time. I came in here to make myself known to you this morning. It may be I'll need your coöperation in some little investigations I'm making on this unlucky affair of my grandfather's."

Clarke again extended a cordial hand.

"It's been good to meet you, Mr. Pennington. Naturally I'll help you any way I can. Feel sure of that."

With a word of thanks Ralph was out of the office. Harrowby. He must see Harrowby at once! Could that young man be at his rooms? Ralph could think, at the moment, of no other place to search.

So he hurried to the street and beckoned the first empty taxi. And again, as on the night before, he gave to the driver Lawrence Harrowby's address in an agitated voice. And again he asked for speed.

This second visit within a few hours seemed, in its details, like a repetition of the first. As before, he scarcely expected a response to the blow of the knocker, but hardly had the metal struck on the panel when Harrowby flung open the door.

"Come in here!" cried the lawyer. "And for the love of Heaven, where have you been all morning? I just came back from your house. Randolph told me you left without breakfast."

"All morning? It was nearly noon when I woke up. It's well after lunch-time now."

"Well, we won't quibble over the time, Penn. I came back here with the idea you might possibly look me up or telephone before I had to go out again. And at four o'clock I positively must go out again. I'm glad you're here and can go with me.

"I was afraid I'd have to carry out the job alone. Penn, old man, my bit of reasoning last night was absolutely correct. There's no key to the front door on your grandfather's carrier!"

Pennington smiled eagerly and nodded.

"Not surprised, Harrowby. I've become perfectly sure of that myself."

Harrowby gave him a quick glance of amazement.

"Well, you weren't by any means sure last night. You seemed to think I was weaving a fairy tale. Anyway, I'm right. I saw Dennis this morning. I talked the thing over with him and he agrees, too. He's having the police act on our discoveries.

"But I didn't tell Dennis about my hunch—and so I don't see how the police can act very much more energetically than they have been. I didn't want to let Dennis in on that. He can know when we're sure ourselves."

"Your hunch, Harrowby? What do you mean by your hunch?"

"You've forgotten that fat man at the inquest, haven't you Penn? You've forgotten our friend Downey!"

Pennington smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"I had almost forgotten him, that's true. Harrowby, I don't think that trail leads anywhere. I've made a few discoveries of my own. And I think I know, in general, who murdered my poor grandfather and why. And I think I understand why Clara was kidnaped!"

XIII.

HARROWBY, with lighted cigarette poised delicately in one hand, let the smoke drift slowly from the fissure of incredulously smiling lips.

"Tell me about it, Penn!"

Ralph began with the series of notions that had led him to visit the building superintendent. And as he concluded with the story of the lost employee the look of incredulity passed entirely from Harrowby's features.

"By George!" exclaimed the young lawyer. "I think you *have* struck something. It certainly looks like that porter fellow was at least in on the deal. But, Penn, you exaggerated a little when you said you knew absolutely who strangled your grandfather and who has Clara Lathrop."

Pennington shook his head in emphatic denial.

"No, I didn't, Harrowby. I do know. And in a minute you're going to know, too, and agree with me. Sibi Ghazi, my friend! The thieving priests of the temple at Sibi Ghazi! The only crowd that ever made a fool of my very shrewd grandfather—and that by an extraordinary accident. The agents of the temple at Sibi Ghazi put an end to Isaac Pennington's life—and the same agents kidnaped Clara!"

"Just a minute, Penn!" cried Harrowby, his voice high-pitched with sudden excitement. "Just a minute, old man. I begin to get this. I'll see it in a moment."

"You might as well let me tell you and you'll see it all the clearer. What was it

you said—'Things in plain sight are the hardest things to see.' The most helpful words you ever coined, Harrowby.

"Why was it the district attorney and every one else were immediately suspicious of me as the possible murderer? Merely because I was the last one seen to come out of my grandfather's office? Yes, partly. But that wouldn't have sufficed entirely for the immediate and very pronounced suspicion. They'd have been a little more eager to investigate further—to do the sort of investigation you and I have done if they hadn't been so sure that in addition to my being the last person seen alone in the private office, I was also the only obvious person with a powerful motive for my grandfather's death.

"They forgot—it was too much in plain sight—that some one else, a group, had a still more powerful motive. The temple thieves at Sibi Ghazi. Those Punjab fellows that have been supported by my poor grandfather for more than twenty years! And of course those chaps knew about my grandfather's will. He'd doubtless communicated its terms to them. And I haven't any doubt they'd planned what to do after his death in order to get the property under the terms of the will.

"They planned to do a part of what's already been done—get rid of Clara for a sufficient length of time. Kill her if necessary, but otherwise simply hold her."

Ralph paused for breath.

"And when I came back unexpectedly to the States," he went on, "when they learned I was going back, they grew afraid that perhaps they'd never get a chance to put that plan—the plan I'm certain they must have had—into execution. They imagined I might persuade my grandfather to change his will. They didn't want any change. And they weren't going to take chances.

"Do you know that it was just a little more than three months ago that I began to get the plantation affairs in shape for my visit here? Just a bit over three months ago that the news got about in Sibi Ghazi that I was making my first trip back to the States?"

Harrowby had been following Pennington's recital with a palpably augmenting interest.

"I've followed you carefully, Penn. But I miss the last point."

"Then just try to remember what I told you a few moments ago—what Clarke told me about his missing helper. Clarke said the fellow had been with him about three months. Is that a coincidence? Or doesn't it establish the connection? And remember too that Clarke spoke of him as a negro—but not an American negro. 'He probably came from Haiti or one of those islands of the West Indies,' Clarke said. Our friend Clarke is not much of an ethnologist. I'm positively certain that the rascal Clarke had in his employ was not from the West Indies at all—but from India!"

Harrowby nodded quickly.

"That sounds like good stuff to me, Penn. It's very probably right. And, of course, the motive is plain enough now. That crowd would naturally be alarmed by your visit to the States—especially as your grandfather had never called you back before. They feared a change in the will.

"Under the existing will they were to get the bulk of the estate if you didn't marry Clara Lathrop—within sixty days, wasn't it? And they'd planned very carefully to cause Clara's disappearance so that that provision of the will couldn't be carried out. Yes, I agree with you on all those points.

"But when they learned you were going home they determined on desperate measures. A bit of inquiry showed them the easiest way to carry out their scheme. Possibly they determined to do away with your grandfather under circumstances that would also throw suspicion on you. It looks that way. Anyhow, one of them took that job with Clarke—well in advance. And once your grandfather was out of the way they proceeded to execute their original plan—to get Clara out of the way and keep her out of the way until the time provided by the will expired.

"However, there was just a bit of bungling there, Penn. Clara managed to scream before they could gag her—and she roused Randolph and yourself. I think their real plan was to carry her off in absolute

mystery. Have it appear that she simply walked out of the house during the night and never came back."

There were implications in Harrowby's recapitulation that suddenly aroused Ralph to a renewed consciousness of Clara Lathrop's plight. The original plan, he felt sure, had been purely one of kidnaping. But once a murder had become necessary a second murder might be deemed expedient.

At any moment, in their dark counsels, the captors of Clara might determine it best to do away with her. Unless—unless they held Clara as a shield for themselves, as a club over his, Ralph's, head in the event that he made any discoveries. The price of her life might be planned as the price of his silence—

He was on his feet again, pacing the room in an extremity of anxiety.

"Harrowby," he cried, "everything we've discovered and imagined may be true to the dot of an eye—but we don't know where Clara is, and we haven't an idea! We've got to get some lead on that! We must! Haven't we gone as far alone as we can? Why not go to see Dennis and lay everything before him? Why not urge him to greater activity?"

In answer Harrowby glanced at the watch on his wrist.

"Almost three-thirty, Penn. That means, in a few minutes, we'll have to jump."

"What do you mean?"

"You've forgotten about my hunch!"

"Hunch? Creighton Downey? That's very far afield, old man. I think we've let him out—"

"Nothing of the kind! It just occurs to me that we've let him in a good bit more definitely than ever before. Before we had only the notion that some one seemed especially interested in you who had no particular right to be. Downey was just a little indiscreet when he attended that inquest. But I understand why he was there—wanted to size you up. Wanted to see just what sort of stuff the opposition was made of.

"And look here, Penn. You don't suppose that crowd could possibly act here in America without unscrupulous and competent advice? Even if we hadn't by luck vaguely connected Downey with the business, we'd been obliged, on due thought, to imagine somewhere an American agent—yes, a legal agent. And Downey, with the shady businesses connected with his name, is just the man!

"Furthermore, don't forget what I told you of him. The fellow has only lived off and on in this country. A great part of the time he's spent his years abroad. In out of the way places. In the Orient. Why not India? If we had time it might not be difficult to check up that point. But we haven't time. It's half past three now—"

"What do you mean, Harrowby? Where are we going?"

The young lawyer smiled.

"We both played in luck to-day," he answered. "You and I. I happened to see our friend Downey this morning. And what's more, I happened to pick up what I think is a very useful piece of news.

"Dennis wasn't on hand when I first called on him. So I slipped into the police court to amuse myself by watching one of the magistrates send the bums without friends up for sixty days. The audience consisted of the usual crowd of loafers and ambulance chasers. And then I happened to catch sight of our plump friend spread out on one of the benches. Evidently he was killing a little time, too.

"I didn't let him imagine I was watching him. I don't think he knows I'm connected with you. That isn't in the papers yet. So I kept a reasonably comfortable eye on him without having to hide myself. After a little while I saw him get up and waddle over to the door. I got up and followed.

"Do you remember the row of telephone booths in the corridor? Maybe not—anyway, there are half a dozen booths not far from the door. I saw Downey making for one of them and I slipped into the box next to the one he'd chosen. As you know, Penn, they're not at all sound-proof.

"I heard him give a number. So that he couldn't be at all suspicious, I gave a number also—the number of my apartment. I knew no one was there and if necessary I could hold a pleasant little conversation with myself.

"Well, Downey got his number and the first words he said were: 'Why the devil don't you fellows answer the telephone? I called you from my office and couldn't get a whisper.' Evidently his party said they couldn't understand this, for Downey commented: 'All right. I suppose it's this rotten service. Anyway, I've got you now. Will my car be ready on time?' It struck me then that he must be calling some motor repair shop. Then I heard him say: 'Good! You're perfectly certain are you? This is important, because if it isn't finished on time I'll have to rent a car.'

"I suppose they reassured him for he went on:

"'At four o'clock, then. Make it sharp. At my apartment at four o'clock.' Penn, I'd heard enough. I hung up and slipped out before Downey finished with his people.

"I knew this much—his car was to be brought from the repair men at four o'clock and he was mighty anxious that it should be at his place on time. He's going to make a little trip then. Maybe the place he's going will interest us—and maybe not. But at any rate it's our business to—"

"Follow him!" put in Pennington. "We'll follow him, Harrowby, to Gehenna and back again. And for God's sake don't lose any more time. Is your own car around the corner?"

"Just a minute, old fellow. Just a second please."

With a calm that almost angered Ralph, his friend walked to his desk and pulled at the drawer. It opened. Out of the drawer he drew a pair of compact automatics.

"Slip one of these in your pocket, Penn. You never can tell!"

Lithely he sprang toward the door.

"And now we're off!"

XIV.

THE garage where Harrowby kept his motor was less than a block from his apartment.

"You'd better take the back seat, Penn," advised the lawyer. "We certainly don't want this fellow to think he's being followed—and if he catches a glimpse of you he'll know it."

With a nod, Ralph obeyed. They pulled out of the garage and swung into the street. Downey's apartment was farther uptown than Harrowby's, but no great distance away. When they wheeled into his street Harrowby jerked his head.

"Give a glance over there, Penn."

A runabout, driven by a man in overalls, was just being driven up before the entrance of an apartment house.

"We'll pull to the curb here, below, on this other side of the street."

The garage man entered the apartment house, evidently to report delivery of the car, and a few minutes later emerged. He walked up the street and disappeared around the corner.

Pennington's eyes fastened themselves unwaveringly on the runabout ahead. Would that lead him to Clara? He had almost the faith that it would. His mind dealt not at all with any difficulties of rescue. It was also a part of his faith that the girl was still alive and that she would be rescued.

Dismissing the details of her release from his thoughts, he delivered over his imagination to the moment when they would confront each other again, alone, after the stress of these terrible events. And clearly he saw himself taking Clara into his arms.

But these imaginings did not wholly engross his senses. His scrutiny of the apartment house and the runabout that was like a dark, squat beetle resting before it, did not waver. A little later, with a physical start, he saw a fat man, an ox of a man, lumber down the flight of ornate steps.

He glanced swiftly at Harrowby. The young man, without turning his head, seemed conscious of that glance for he nodded.

They watched Downey as he squeezed himself under the wheel. They heard his engine start and saw his car jerk forward. He had not looked around him. He felt utterly secure.

Harrowby waited until he had passed the corner until he moved forward himself.

"He's not turning, Penn. Going on down town. I thought he'd strike the other direction. Well, we'll have to draw

a little closer when we get into the traffic. He might lose us."

For a time neither of the young men spoke. They became, within a few minutes, part of a shifting design of vehicles, obstreperous taxis, sedate limousines sleek as tigers, hulking trucks, with here and there a dray.

Harrowby had drawn a bit closer to the car he followed and at last he said:

"I get it now, old man. He's making for the ferry. That means a little trip through Jersey. Very well! Wherever he leads we follow!"

"I'll have to get right behind him now, Penn," Harrowby added, a little later. "Otherwise we might not get on the same boat. Good-by to the hunt then! So you'd better duck down a little in your seat. He might look around—especially while we're on the ferry. He mustn't see you, old fellow!"

They nosed in to a place directly behind the runabout. Pennington stooped, holding his face between his hands close to his knees. He had the appearance of one who had sipped a bit too freely of forbidden liquids. And in a sense he was inebriated—drunk with commingled emotions of anger and expectation.

There followed the nerve-distressing wait in a long thread of cars that jerked and stopped, jerked and stopped. As they drew nearer the ferry entrance a harsh anxiety caused Ralph's pulses to beat more quickly.

Suppose it should happen that Downey's car would be the last one permitted to enter a particular boat? Suppose they would be forced to take a place on the next one? That would mean, in all probability, the end of their present chase. Their sole recourse then would be to turn all their reasoning and suspicions over to Dennis that he might have Creighton Downey watched and followed every hour.

With a release of taut muscles, and an accompanying sigh, Ralph saw at last that they were to follow on board the same boat as their leader. There was a familiar jangling of bells, a swishing of water, and the lumbering boat put out.

Harrowby turned around and grinned.

"Made it!" he exclaimed in a subdued voice. "Made it, by George! He'll not lose us now!"

"Not lose us now!" agreed Pennington. All his confidence was restored; his resourceful calm had returned to him.

XV.

For half an hour they had been following the runabout over a macadam road into the country. Harrowby kept well behind save on the sharp turns where there was a chance of the other car eluding them. This, however, was unlikely, since Downey still seemed wholly unsuspicious of pursuit.

Indeed, he drove at a rather moderate speed and largely Harrowby was content to have between him and the leader another motor or two. But he kept well out to the center of the road with the runabout always in sight.

Outwardly there seemed no pursuer nor pursued. This was no mad drive, at death-inviting pace such as would have been romantically appropriate. Their engine purred contentedly, the car glided over smooth macadam with scarcely a jolt and to spectators along the road, farmers standing behind their horses in the fields, loiterers before stores in country villages, the two young men had in no way the appearance of actors in a bold adventure.

Nevertheless, they held stanchly to the conviction that they were playing significant rôles and when, after the passage of another half hour, the runabout swerved from the macadam into a dirt road this conviction deepened.

"A bit of caution here, Penn," said Harrowby. "We can't draw very close. If we do he might easily suspect something. Fortunately it's dry and he raises a pretty good trail of dust. If he makes an unexpected turn we're fairly certain to come up on the settlings of that trail. I certainly hope the beggar gets to the end of his trip before dark!"

"He won't be that long," rejoined Ralph, a kind of tenseness in his voice. "It isn't reasonable to imagine that he intends to drive the whole length of the State."

"I think you're right, old fellow. I believe it won't be long now until we know

one thing or another. Either we're rather clever or we're exceptionally foolish. Presently we'll be certain."

They passed a final village, a straggling group of frame houses evidently inhabited by Italian truck farmers. And then, on both sides of the road, the woods closed in, a woods of small pines and poplars and scarcely passable brambles.

The road grew gloomy in the shadows. And the ruts were deeper, the sandy stretches more frequent.

"Not much travel here," commented Harrowby. "We're rather getting out of the world. For us—a good sign."

Ralph nodded. The jolting of the car kept him somewhat occupied at the undignified business of maintaining a place on the seat. Their speed was reduced, both out of necessity and caution.

But there was no difficulty in following the trail of smoky dust that took many minutes wholly to settle. For several minutes the runabout had been invisible, disappeared around a turn, with only the revealing pall of dust above the road to indicate its passage.

Harrowby made the turn—and with a start both young men saw an empty, undefiled straightaway in front of them.

"He's turned in," whispered Harrowby. "Keep your head low, Penn, and your eyes open!"

Their car was throttled down to a crawl. Running a few hundred feet they both perceived, at the same instant, a rutty lane that turned into the woods sharply.

The lane was damp with fallen leaves and straggling grass that grew up to the edges of the thicket. Here there was no tell-tale dust. Yet, sighting this lane, both young men realized that Downey must have entered and gone down it. Nowhere else could he have vanished.

Harrowby did not turn, however. He drove on, several hundred yards and Ralph understood immediately the wisdom of this maneuver. Whatever habitation there might be concealed in the woods, they must not approach it visibly, by the lane.

When they had gone three or four hundred yards Harrowby drew up to the side of the road. He shut off the engine.

"Penn," he said quietly, "we're here. And now we'll have to have a look. I think we can find out where our fat friend has gone without having to walk very far and without being seen."

Pennington laid a detaining hand on the other's arm.

"Old fellow," he began, "it was an amazing piece of luck for me when I ran into you the other day. I really think, with the help you've given, I'm about at the end of this mystery. Without you I don't know where I'd have been. Maybe locked up, waiting for the action of the grand jury. Already you've done immensely more than the customary lawyer—"

Harrowby tried to free his arm, to walk forward.

"That's all right, Penn. Tell me about that later."

"Please, Harrowby! Just a minute! You've done enough already. A good bit more than what would be considered enough. God knows what I'll find back there in those woods. Somehow I've got absolute confidence in coming through. But I don't see any reason why you should put yourself in what may be very real danger for my sake. You don't owe anything so great as that to me. I want you to stay here, Harrowby. I want you to stay and wait—at least until I look over the ground. I'll promise to do no more than that—to come back and report."

Harrowby, with a gesture of mock disdain, released his coat-sleeve from the detaining fingers.

"Is that all, Penn?" he asked. "You've had your little say now, have you? Very well then, we'll go on—together! If you think you're going to hog all this little excitement for yourself, now that I've come this far—you're due to take a long other think!"

XVI.

THEY entered the woods somewhat above the lane which seemed to them a wiser course than going by the easier way. In the lane some one might be met with—an event especially to be shunned.

Both young men understood that the whole success of their immediate under-

taking was conditioned by the achievement of a surprise.

The sun had already descended but the sky was still alight with seductive color. In the woods, however, it was gloomy. And it was by no means easy to make way through the underbrush and the brambles that clung to their clothing with waspish pertinacity.

They had struck in diagonally and presently sighted the dimming track of the lane to their left. In spite of their immediate difficulties both, however, were still unwilling to avail themselves of this far easier path. Luckily, however, by skirting the lane movement was a trifle less impeded, and should any one be sighted concealment would be facile.

After some minutes of sufficiently tedious forward progress they came abruptly upon a bit of rotting fence so overgrown with vines that it seemed more like a natural barrier than one erected by human hands.

To the immoderate relief of both young men they found cleared land on the other side of the fence, with a narrow strip of woods following up along the lane on either side.

The field was grown tall with weeds, but these offered very little impediment.

For the first time Ralph spoke.

"I've an idea," he whispered, "we're going to come to a farmhouse. This looks like an abandoned farm. Certainly this field hasn't been under cultivation for years."

Harrowby nodded.

The weeds, having grown all summer, were now in seed and their tops were so lofty that the pair were virtually concealed by these alone. In the rapidly departing daylight an observer might have stood at the edge of the woods and failed to note them, unless his eyes were keen enough to see the agitated tops of the weeds that in this fashion marked their progress.

From time to time Pennington or his companion, standing on tip-toes, peered over at the bordering strip of woodland in order to mark the turnings of the lane.

With the same abruptness as before they were confronted by a second fence, or at least a probable fence since it was impossible to see the rails or the posts for heaped up vines and brambles.

Ralph laid a detaining hand on the arm of his friend.

He then stooped and oblivious to the sting of thorns, parted the fabric of leaves, stalks and tendrils and peered through the small opening he had made.

Over the fence was another field, dipping sharply to a hollow. And there, with quickened heart-beats, he saw the gray outlines of a house.

Harrowby was looking over his shoulder. Neither spoke.

There came then to Ralph Pennington the superlative emotion of a gambler who stakes his whole fortune upon a single chance. It seemed to him that if Clara were indeed a prisoner in that shabby old house, apparently without human occupants, he would assuredly succeed in releasing her—and from the horrors of the past days and hours he would as certainly win to an enduring happiness. It was with the gambler's sense of a fateful moment that he abruptly flung himself against the barrier, found a fence rail with a searching foot, and mounted to the other side.

"Keep low!" he whispered to Harrowby. "The weeds will hide us. It's nearly dark now."

They descended swiftly to the lower edge of the field. Here they encountered another fence that separated what had once been cultivated land from a former lawn before the house. Now the lawn was grown up in tall grass, but neither sufficiently dense nor sufficiently high to conceal them.

Both stood back a little from the fence in their weedy concealment, searching the long-unpainted farmhouse with painfully eager eyes. The sky was wan; stars were about to break through the augmenting gloom. The light barely sufficed to show them a porch with the roof sagging at one end, the closed door, and windows heavily boarded upstairs and down.

These boards, like the rest of the woodwork, seemed gray from the wash of numberless rains. Evidently they had been put in their places years before to make intrusion into the tenantless house more difficult.

With an eagerness that had the effect of physical pain, Ralph scrutinized the building for some evidence of occupancy.

For a few moments all his senses were visited by a terrible depression. He felt himself teetering horribly over an abyss of failure. And then, with a happy shock of revelation, his eye encountered an object that caused him to turn, gripping the arm that Harrowby had laid upon his shoulder.

"Toward the back of the house!" he whispered. "Look!"

Jutting a few inches beyond the frame wall was visible the arc of an automobile wheel, the forward end of a fender and the nickeled outlines of a radiator. The familiar runabout!

Harrowby liberated a tense grunt of recognition and understanding.

"We weren't wrong!" he whispered. "At least about Downey turning in here. And, Penn, I don't think we're wrong about the rest!"

"I don't think so either, Harrowby."

"Well, we solved the other problems. Now let's solve this one, immediately. How are we going to get in there and do what we have to do?"

"The confounded windows," muttered Ralph. "Boarded up! That makes it difficult."

"Yes, that makes it difficult. Some of those boards might be loose."

"I don't doubt it, Harrowby. From here they look mighty sound. I wouldn't be surprised if those fellows had gone over them since they came here and made them secure."

"Anyway, Penn, ripping off those boards, even if we could find some loose ones, would probably make an infernal racket. Do you suppose they have both doors locked, front and back?"

"Naturally. I should think they would."

"I don't know. Maybe not. Certainly if they have Clara in there they don't give her the freedom of the house. She's probably locked in one of the rooms. They wouldn't necessarily have to keep the front and back doors locked, especially while they're all on hand. That would make it inconvenient going in and out. And they're not looking for sudden visitors back here."

"What of it? You don't propose to walk in by the front door, do you?"

"Why not, Penn? Why not the easiest way, if it's possible? The plainest way, the easiest way—that always seems to be the unthought of way. They wouldn't expect to see anybody walk in through a conventional entrance. I believe, if we have the luck to find one of the doors open, that's the best chance for a surprise!"

Pennington, whose whole body was in a painful tremor for want of action, needed no further prompting to follow a course that might carry him inside the house.

He said nothing further, but in assent, put his foot on the lower fence rail and vaulted the barrier. He heard Harrowby's light-footed leap behind him.

They ran forward through the tall grass, crouching. Unless some one were on the outside, concealed in the woods or the ruinous outbuildings, both, it seemed to them, had a chance to reach the house unseen.

The thought came to Ralph, as he ran forward, that like most overly clever criminals these brutes had too great a confidence in their own astuteness, and consequently in their own security.

At the edge of the sagging porch the young man hesitated just an instant. Then, although neither spoke, but as if a word of command had been voiced inwardly to each simultaneously, they stepped up on the porch and stood before the door.

Harrowby put his hand on the knob. It turned. He pushed—and the door yielded. With one swift, backward glance at Pennington he opened the door and noiselessly entered. On his heels Ralph followed.

They were in the hall of an old-fashioned farmhouse. Toward the rear a flight of stairs ascended to the second floor. These were unlighted and but dimly perceptible. Forward, on either side of the hall, tall doors opened into opposite rooms. And through one of these a diagonal of lamplight fell like a sinister banner across the floor.

There was a murmur of voices—a speech sibilant and guttural. Pennington clutched his companion's arm for a single instant. He could not speak, but Harrowby understood.

Their conjectures were proven. The men

within the lighted room were speaking in the Punjab dialect.

Harrowby's revolver was in his hand. He turned, facing Pennington. And Pennington nodded.

With one or two strides the two young men were at the door.

Three swarthy men, two of them wearing cloth headdresses, were seated, cross-legged, upon an infirm sofa. And in a battered Windsor chair, filling it entirely, was Creighton Downey.

These four faces were turned all the same instant toward the astounding presences in the doorway. And the eyes in these astonished faces saw a pair of automatic pistols very steadily covering them.

It was Harrowby who broke the silence.

"Good evening, Mr. Downey," he said. "A pleasant retreat you have here in the wilderness. I'll let you introduce me to your foreign friends later. Just now I might as well introduce myself. Like yourself, Mr. Downey, I'm an attorney and counselor at law. Only I haven't quite your reputation, Mr. Downey. I'm not quite so well-known. My name is Lawrence Harrowby. And this is my client and friend, Mr. Ralph Pennington. I believe you've seen Mr. Pennington before!"

Downey did not speak. But his great bulk seemed, like a bladder under inflation, to be swelling up over the edges of the battered chair that contained it. His face reddened, his cheeks puffed, and the crafty, fox-like eyes in the swinish face grew narrower.

As for the three men from Sibi Ghazi, they remained motionless, squatted upon the sofa, their faces immobile and only their dusky eyes betraying their alertness.

Pennington had heard the bantering speech of his friend with some impatience. He waited an instant for Creighton Downey to reply. And since those obese lips did not open, he strode forward abruptly.

"Now, you fat brute," he cried, "you probably realize that you've been just a bit too clever. You didn't bungle quite enough. Your plan worked too smoothly. A little bungling and you might have made your trail more difficult. But here you are and here we are. And within the next minute, if you want to live longer than that, you're going to take me to the room where you've locked up Clara Lathrop!"

And with this final, emphatic command, he thrust the blue muzzle of the automatic into the fleshy folds of Downey's body.

XVII.

EVEN now Creighton Downey maintained his silence. His face had fallen a little, his eyes searched the floor, and he seemed to have yielded incongruously to a brief mood of abstracted meditation. Then he raised his face again and looking beyond Pennington, glanced briefly at the door.

Ralph caught the significance of this glance. The lawyer and adventurer was endeavoring to understand thoroughly the limits of his present predicament. He was making an effort to discover whether or not there were others outside, whether the two young men had come alone or attended.

Again Ralph spoke in a voice harshly tense.

"You've only got a few more seconds to act, Downey!"

Downey raised his eyes and met for an instant the steady gaze of the young man standing over him. It was a searching glance, a glance similar to that intent scrutiny with which he had examined the same young man during the inquest.

This further scrutiny seemed to convince him of a particular fact. His shoulders moved slightly, as if with a sigh. And in the dialect quite familiar to Ralph Pennington, he spoke to one of the squatting figures on the sofa.

"You have the key. Take the *sahib* up."

Emotionlessly the Hindu arose. Ralph glanced intently at his face, and at the faces of his native brothers.

Had he seen any of these men before at Sibi Ghazi? He could not be certain. For one thing, he scarcely ever entered the temple. Yet in one or another of these dark countenances he sensed a certain familiarity of features. And assuredly *he* was recognized; assuredly they knew *him*.

With his headdress fluttering a little as he walked, the Hindu approached the table

and lit another lamp. He turned to Ralph. "If the *sahib* is ready," he said.

Ralph addressed Harrowby.

"I'll follow this rascal, Harrowby," he announced. "You'll stay below with the others."

"Certainly, Penn. Nothing could be more delightful. I want so much to have a little chat with the fat gentleman. To ask him an intimate question or two. For instance, what sort of a diet he uses to make him so healthy and intelligent."

Unsmiling, Ralph again faced the Hindu. "Very well!" he commanded.

Passing out of the door behind his guide, who held the lamp aloft, he heard Harrowby's bantering voice advising Downey not to move too freely and to instruct his foreign friends to be equally circumspect.

Then, behind the native, he began the ascent of the stairs.

They came to the upper floor and an uncarpeted hallway. On this the Hindu's bare feet made a light pattering, but Ralph's heels sounded resonantly. The small lamp illumined floor and walls with flickers of yellow light. Ralph could feel the oppressive beating of his heart, but it throbbed neither in fear nor apprehension. He felt utterly sure of himself and utterly certain of success. His heart beat because he was near Clara—because, after the torment of these hours, he was about to find and save her.

The Hindu had paused in front of a closed door.

"Set the lamp on the floor," commanded Ralph.

He was obeyed, and a key was thrust into the lock. It turned.

"Pick up the lamp, open the door, and go in in front of me."

The door yielded to a slight push on the knob, and Ralph's captive preceded him into the room. Over the shoulders of the native the young man's eyes swept the place in an all-devouring glance.

Against the boarded window there was a cot. In the center of the room stood a small, uncovered table. Drawn up to this was a chair. And there, startled and wraithlike in the yellow light, half rising, was Clara Lathrop.

Ralph felt as if his whole body were inundated by a caressing, tepid wave of measureless relief. Until that instant, for all his assertions of assurance, he had not been utterly confident that Clara was still alive. He had never admitted in words a terrifying doubt that had, nevertheless, dwelt secretly in his heart. And now he saw her, breathing, living, arising from her chair, with incredulous recognition in her pale face.

A few further crisp words of command he spoke to the Hindu.

"Over by the window. Stand there. Hold the lamp by both hands, keep them up as high as your chin, and don't move!"

His eyes turned then to Clara.

"I've found you, Clara! Poor child! Poor girl! I've found you, dear!"

He was at her side. One arm supported her trembling body. And even yet the expression of incredulity had not passed from her features.

"Ralph!" she murmured. "You've really come for me!"

"Found you at last," repeated Ralph. "And, Clara, I'll not lose you quickly again. Have you been harmed, dear—have you been hurt in any way?"

She shook her head.

"My sufferings have been only anxieties, and the terrible loneliness of this closed room. What does it mean, Ralph—what does it mean? I've been told nothing."

"Can't tell you that now, Clara—the story's too long. We're not yet out of here. You've been in the gravest danger, dear."

Still circling her with his arm, he turned toward the Hindu, who held the lamp up in both hands.

"Go ahead of us!" he commanded. "In front of us—down the stairs."

Behind the Hindu the young man followed with the girl. They reached the stairs, close on the heels of their guide. Ralph followed so closely for a double reason. He wished quickly to be able to lay hands on the native should the latter attempt any treachery—and, again, he trod immediately upon the fellow's heels because, even at a little distance, the small oil lamp provided a very meager illumination.

His caution, however, proved an unfore-

seen error. They had descended two or three steps of the flight, when the Hindu, with amazing intrepidity, flung himself backward upon the man and the girl. The lamp was catapulted from his hands and crashed at the foot of the stairs.

In the same instant the explosion of Pennington's automatic reverberated against the bare walls, but he knew instantly that the shot was wild. Still clinging to the girl, he clutched wildly at the banister. Hanging perilously for an instant, he caught one flashing impression of the Hindu bounding downstairs and a second later the pursuing figure of Harrowby rushing out into the hall below.

And then the momentary darkness was terrifyingly illumined by a glare of yellow, leaping light. At the foot of the stairs a great splotch of oil from the broken lamp was in flames.

Clinging another second to the banister, Pennington regained at last his foothold. Against his arm Clara lay limp and heavy. Quickly he glanced into her face. She had fainted.

His startled eyes left her to glance again at the flames leaping yet higher in the hall below. This glance showed him that there was still a narrow passage to the outer door. —The lamp had broken a little to one side of the stairs and somewhat nearer the door where Harrowby had been holding prisoners the other conspirators.

Resolutely, Ralph gathered Clara in his arms. He bounded down the stairs in perilous strides, racing against the spread of the flames. At the bottom, as he hugged close to the wall, jets of fire licked at him. But he was outdoors now, breathing the crisp evening air.

Clara still lay inert in his arms. As he looked for an instant at the house, a puff of flame and smoke filled the doorway, was sucked in, and reappeared.

The automatic dangled from his finger. He gripped it tighter, and at the same time lowered the girl to the grass. As he kneeled, supporting her in the hollow of his arm, her eyes opened.

"Safe!" he murmured close to her ear. "Out of there at last, dear."

Her lips parted and exhaled a prolonged sigh. With this a measure of her fright and weariness vanished. She struggled to her feet, clasping Ralph's arm. But before he could speak there was a patter of footsteps behind him. He turned instantly, his finger tightening against the trigger of his weapon.

It was Harrowby, breathless and a bit disheveled. Burrs were clinging to his trousers and a long bramble scratch cut diagonally across his face.

"Got away from me!" he cried. "I couldn't come up with him in the dark. He lost me in the woods. I was afraid to go farther. Afraid the others might break their way out. But I don't think that fellow will get far. As soon as descriptions are sent out the police will pick him up."

"The others!" cried Ralph, thinking for the first time of the two natives and the obese white man. "My God, Harrowby, where are the others!"

Harrowby stood with his back to the house as he answered:

"When I heard that row on the stairs I took one quick glance toward the door. And by chance my eye caught the glitter of metal in the lock. A key! Then I heard your shot. It was your shot, wasn't it? Without a word I leaped backward, swung the door shut and locked it. It would take those fellows more than a few minutes to batter down that solid square of oak—or to break through those windows."

"Locked in the room! Harrowby! Look!"

His hand had seized the young lawyer's arm, and under the urge of his fingers Harrowby turned sharply and faced the house. From his lips came an instant gasp of amazement.

Like a fiery exhalation from the mouth of some fabulous monster the open door belched smoke and flame. Above the upper sill the flames licked at the outer woodwork.

For several appalling moments the trio stood staring at the house.

"Got to get them out!" cried Harrowby. "Got to get them out, Penn!"

And he took a step toward the door.

Again Ralph seized his arm.

"Keep your head, Harrowby, for the

love of God! You can't go in there. Nobody can. The whole hall's an inferno. And I'm sure the oil ran under that locked door. The fire began on that side. Around to the windows, man! We may be able to wrench off the boards. Or maybe they've broken through by now from the inside."

Racing together, they rounded the house. Both men grasped at the heavy boarding, but there was no place effectually to take hold.

"If we had an iron bar. Anything to pry with!"

"Downey's car!" cried Pennington. "Look in Downey's car. Find something there, Harrowby!"

Harrowby darted toward the rear. Inside Ralph became aware of a frantic pounding. There was a crashing inner impact against the stanch boards. Harrowby came running back with the crank from Downey's car clutched in one hand.

And then, as he reached Pennington's side, a puff of smoke issued ominously between the cracks of the boarding. A puff of smoke, wispy for a second, angrily jet-like a second later—another jet of smoke, and a swift, serpentine tongue of flame!

"Too late, Harrowby! We're too late! The unlucky, miserable devils!"

XVIII.

THE two young men and the girl, emerging from the lane, were hurrying up the road toward Harrowby's car. Against the sky was the ominously clotted glare from the burning house.

They had determined to head at once for the nearest town and the nearest authorities.

With Clara, Pennington took a place on the rear seat.

Harrowby's motor roared and the car leaped forward like a swift beast freed from its leash.

"Tell me, Ralph," whispered the girl. "Explain this to me."

"Not everything now," he replied. "But enough to make you understand."

And, omitting the less essential details, he told her of the discoveries made by himself and Harrowby, and how from seemingly trivial facts they had been able to conceive a motive for the death of Isaac Pennington and her own disappearance.

"I don't know whether they would have let you live or not, Clara," he concluded. "With one murder on their hands, they would not have balked long at another. It was just a fortunate fact that they were carrying out an earlier, simpler plan—conceived before the plot to kill my poor grandfather—that you were taken at all. It would have been simpler to put you out of the way, too. Or perhaps not—I'm not sure.

"Anyway, at the best, they'd have kept you prisoner well over the limit of sixty days set in the will. They'd have kept you prisoner until everything had been transferred legally to the temple at Sibi Ghazi; and until those unlucky devils had got out of the country, and so made identification, later on, almost impossible."

"The period of sixty days set in the will," she murmured.

With a quick movement Ralph Pennington reached out and clasped her hand.

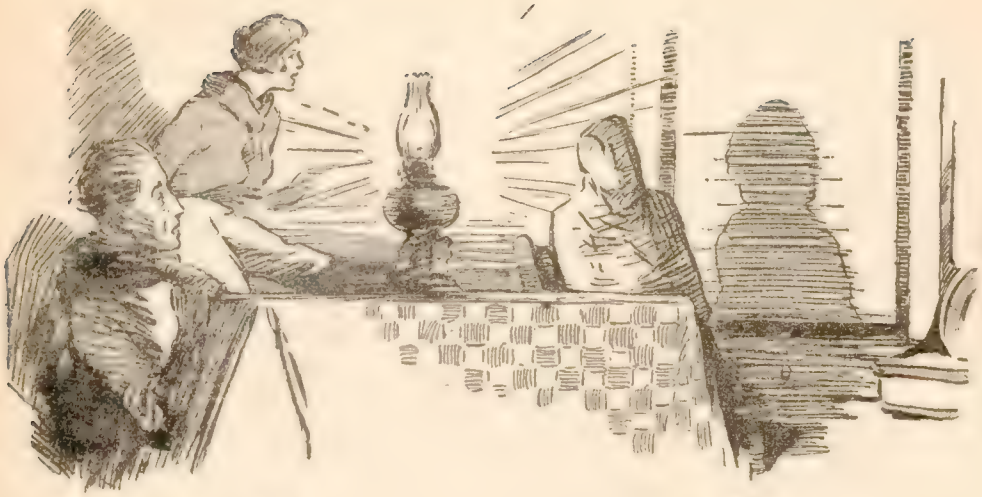
"There was a phrase of Harrowby's," he whispered, "that virtually accounted for our success. 'Things in plain sight are the hardest things to see.' That led us to understand the question of the missing key and the missing janitor. And now, Clara, it means something else to me. I can't say much now—but you must know a little. I can't let you go longer without knowing.

"When my poor grandfather," he went on, "told me that he'd arranged a marriage for me, made a will on that arrangement, found a girl I was supposed to love, my eyes were just for a few hours blind. It wasn't until you were carried off that I saw clearly what had been in plain sight all the while. Do you know what I mean, dear girl? Right under my eyes, in plain sight, had been what I really did want."

With lowered face Clara sat for a second without moving.

And then, just for an instant, her head was lowered against Ralph Pennington's shoulder, and her cool cheek brushed his own.

THE END



Unhearing Ears.

By ARTHUR PRESTON HANKINS

Author of "Gold from the Cañon," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

JOYCE LARUE faces a perilous situation while her cowboy sweetheart, Lin Columbia, is invalided from a bullet wound. Her mother, Mrs. Anita Tyrone, is heir to a vast ranch through the death of her outlaw husband, "Black" Ozias Tyrone. But Tyrone's will provides that the villainous Noah Littlejohn shall remain as foreman for one year after decedent's death. Littlejohn had become deaf from the underwater explosion of his revolver while he battled in a river pool with Lin Columbia. Joyce rides from Lin's mining camp to the Tyrone ranch, and learns her mother has left for the distant town. "Slim" Cook, cowhand, is alone at the big house. A man's shadow mysteriously appears on the piazza floor; a bowie knife plunges unseen into the roof. Joyce rides to town and hires as *vaquero* a stranger tall and somber, who calls himself "Snipe" Quimby. Scarface Hyde, bad man, tries to bluff the girl from hiring Quimby; she slaps his face. Frank Jennings, attorney, turns dictatorial over Tyrone's will, and Quimby lays hands on him until Joyce intervenes. Mrs. Tyrone secretly makes a will in her daughter's favor.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOME AGAIN.

THE attorney, Frank Jennings, had kept his word and sent a man to the office of the justice of the peace to witness Mrs. Tyrone's signature to her will. The morning was still young when Joyce bade her mother good-by, and, with her new squire beside her, set off on the long trail to Tyrone Ranch.

Snipe Quimby, although tramping it across the state when he met Joyce, had proved himself a true cow-puncher in clinging to his saddle and bridle. He had had them with him in the box car, he said, when the angry freight conductor announced the unexpected end of his journey on that particular train.

Joyce had met with a surprise when she went to the livery stable to hire a saddle horse for Snipe to ride to the ranch.

"Why, they's a horse here now belongin' to Tyrone Ranch," the livery stable man

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for December 5.

had told her. "Big bay with silver stockin's and a silver streak on his nose. He wears the Tyrone brand."

"'Punishment!'" Joyce cried in astonishment. "How on earth did he get here?"

"Funny thing about that," replied the stable man. "I found 'im in a stall this mornin', clean and bright, and without a sweat mark on 'im. No saddle, no bridle. Jest tied up and eatin' 'alfy like as if he was to home."

Joyce remembered the sound of a horse's hoofs that she had fancied she had heard on the trail, and wondered if the mysterious watchman of Tyrone Ranch had followed her in on Punishment.

She had paid the liveryman for the horse's feed, and led him out for Quimby to ride. And now the two were hidden by the vast sea of chaparral that swept between the ranch and Spruce.

Joyce Larue had taken a great liking to the awkward, mild-eyed puncher since the episode in the justice's office, when Snipe had proved that he meant to consider her interests his own so long as he remained in her employ. She admired this strain of blunt loyalty in his rugged nature. She knew that she needed loyal friends.

She was almost ready to make a confidant of Quimby and tell him all about Noah Littlejohn and the strange happenings at Tyrone Ranch. But she decided that she had better test him further before she could be sure that he, too, was not in the employ of the peeled-faced ogre of her life.

Their ride to the ranch was uneventful. Joyce saw Slim Cook meandering toward them as they rode through the gate. She breathed a sigh of relief at sight of him.

"Well, Slim," she said, "I'm back in one piece, you see. How's everything?"

Slim glanced in curiosity at the lean puncher at the *mestizo's* side. "I'll tell ye later," he replied.

Joyce turned to Snipe. "Mr. Quimby," she said, "this is Mr. Cook, who has worked for the outfit some years. Slim—Snipe."

"Hello, Snipe," said Slim, with a broad grin. "I'm six foot three—thirty waist. What're you?"

"Six feet two and a half," Quimby answered. "About thirty around the middle, too. A hundred and forty-nine."

"One-sixty," Slim answered gravely.

"I picked up a little last winter, wranglin' horses in the mountains," Snipe told him.

"I'll say you did," drawled Slim. "A couple o' pounds, to say th' least."

"Snipe is going to work for us, Slim," Joyce explained.

"I'm glad to hear it," Slim told her. "I'm gettin' lonesome."

Slim ceased his bantering tone and, pushing his hat to the back of his head, gave the horse that Snipe bestrode a critical examination.

"Funny thing," he remarked, "but that there brute looks sorta familiar to me. Looks like th' blaze-faced colt that Lin Columbia broke for us. If that ain't Punishment, I'll kiss 'im."

"It is Punishment," Joyce told him, and went on to explain how the animal had been found by the liveryman.

"Huh!"—from Slim. "How'd he get to Spruce, d'ye reckon?"

"I don't know," Joyce replied. "He hadn't a saddle mark on him, the liveryman told me."

"D'ye know somethin', Miss Joyce? I thought this here Punishment had crossed the great divide. I was out lookin' up th' band yesterday. They're over in th' little meadows, several miles north o' th' house. I counted all of 'em, and one was missin'.

"I tried to remember th' stock I was familiar with on th' home ranch here, and finally come to th' conclusion that th' missin' brute was this same Punishment. Then, ridin' back, I found th' skeleton of a horse in a little draw in th' timber. Picked clean by buzzards and coyotes, but the bones were still green.

"So I reckoned Punishment had cashed in his chips as no other horse was missin' from th' band. And now comes this long-legged person here ridin' Punishment from from Spruce. How come? Is that there a ghost horse ye're forkin', cowboy?"

Joyce laughed, but she was wondering about the skeleton that Slim had found, trying to fit it into the mystery that had

settled upon Tyrone Ranch. She did not see fit, at the time, to tell Slim she had fancied herself followed when she rode through the chaparral on her way to Spruce.

She hardly cared to have the new hand overhear such a statement. Because a strange idea had occurred to her only an hour before, when she had been thinking over the episode in the office of the justice of the peace.

It had seemed to her that Frank Jennings, the attorney, had showed entirely too much disinterest in whether or not he would be permitted to read her mother's will. He even had offered to go out and find another witness to take his place.

Suspecting him as she did, she believed that he would be deeply interested in the provisions of that will. Then why had he so readily offered to forego the opportunity to read it?

To this there was the answer that Snipe Quimby might be in Noah Littlejohn's employ. In that case, he would be in the lawyer's confidence. He would know that to learn the provisions of Mrs. Tyrone's will was greatly desired by Noah and Jennings.

So the attorney, knowing that Snipe would read what he could of the instrument while preparing to sign his name, had made a play to gain the confidence of Joyce and her mother. And Snipe, on his part, might have been acting when he grabbed Jennings by the collar and reproved him for his rudeness.

Joyce did not like to distrust the lank, red-headed puncher, but she was overly suspicious of almost everybody these days. She was taking no chances. At times she considered her half suspicion of him wild and ridiculous. Then again it would seem the most logical thing in the world.

But, at any rate, she refrained from taking him into her confidence on this occasion.

Slim walked behind the two horses to the house, where Joyce dismounted, instinctively glancing up at the veranda roof as she left the saddle. Slim swung aboard her horse, and the two punchers rode together to the stables.

The girl looked after them and a feeling of great relief came over her. They looked so tall and strong and wiry and hard-muscled that she did not feel that strange fear which had assailed her before she left the ranch for Spruce. And, for the time being, she felt no suspicion of the new hand at all.

She went into the house, to find things about as she had left them. She took a cold bath and changed her riding costume for a simple gingham house dress. Then, as evening was approaching, she began preparing supper for herself and the two *vaqueros*. And while she was at work over the kitchen table Slim Cook knocked on the door and entered.

"Well, Slim," she asked, "find a seat and make medicine with me. I'm anxious to know if anything out of the ordinary took place while I was away. Did you see anything of the mysterious person who has been taking care of the stock on Tyrone Ranch?"

"Not a sign," replied Slim, turning a kitchen chair around and slipping the seat of it between his lean legs. He always occupied a chair in this manner when etiquette did not demand that he sit in one according to the conventional custom. Thus used, it seemed more like the back of a horse, he claimed, and made him feel more at home.

"No, I never got a glimpse of 'im, Miss Joyce," he continued. "And I didn't find any tracks or anythin' like that. Guess, if anybody was around here—which they sure was—he was hidin' out some place and watchin' us. He knew th' critters would be cared for when he saw me here, so he didn't trouble 'imself again."

"And so you have nothing at all to report?"

"Nothin' a-tall, Miss Joyce."

Joyce wielded her biscuit cutter and one by one laid disks of dough in the pan in silence.

"Slim," she announced presently, "I've got a shock for you. Tyrone willed this ranch to mother, with the provision that Littlejohn is to remain in charge of it for one year from the date of Tyrone's death.

"Mother can't make any disposition of

the ranch whatever except to leave it to some one in the event of her death. If she doesn't live up to the stipulations of the will, the ranch will go to Tyrone's brother in Alabama. So in order to hold a piece of property that is growing in value every day, mother is obliged to have Littlejohn manage it for a year."

"Sufferin' bobcats!" Slim howled. "Ye don't mean that, Miss Joyce!"

"It's the truth, Slim."

Slim lowered his chin to his wrists on the back of his chair. "I told ye," he reminded her, "that Noah considered th' ranch as good as his. He knew where he stood. It's him that sent some one here to take care o' th' stock until he could get on his feet and 'tend to th' property 'imself. 'Tend to *his* property, I'd better say."

"No, don't say that, Slim!" cried the *mestizo*. "It's not his yet. And I'm going to fight him to a standstill to see that it never becomes his."

"I'd like to stick and help ye, ma'am," said Slim; "but I can't."

"You can't! Why?"

"Noah'll tie th' can to me as soon as he hits th' ranch," Slim returned moodily. "And he'll fire this here Snipe person ye drug in to-day, too. He's a simple-minded old lady, this Snipe is. He thinks you're th' Queen o' Sheba, or somethin', Miss Joyce. He's all knighted up about servin' ye, and all that. So Noah'll send him through th' chute right pronto."

"I'm terribly afraid that you're right, Slim," and the girl sighed as her foot pressed the trigger that tripped the oven door and opened it. "Already he's hiring men for th' ranch. And he sent word to me that it would be inadvisable for me to hire any men myself, as he would be obliged to fire them as soon as he was able to take the ranch in hand.

"I have reason to believe, too, that Small John Copper is still in this country. I think it was he who sent Snipe Quimby to me. Perhaps he misunderstood Noah's instructions when he suggested that Snipe ask me for a job. Or Noah changed his mind after sending him out to look for men and put Scarface Hyde to work on another tack."

"Scarface Hyde! Do you know him?"

"I do now," Joyce replied. "I've punched his nose for him. We ought to be acquainted."

"Ye oughta knocked his head off, ma'am," said Cook. "Tell me how ye happened to tangle up with that flea."

Joyce recounted the episode near the store at Spruce.

"And so Scarface has gone down to Graveyard Flat to help drive th' cows into th' mountains, has he?" mused Slim. "That means he's to be a fixture on Tyrone Ranch, I guess. Him and Small John Copper—if ye're right about it bein' that little runt that set Snipe onto ye! A han'some team, ma'am.

"Noah'll get a bunch like that around ye, and ye'll be willin' to give 'im th' ranch in order to get away. If he picks any more like Scarface Hyde, I'd say ye'd be lucky to have th' old gang here."

"You know this Hyde, then? What about him, Slim?"

"Plumb cultus, ma'am. I knew him in Montana and in New Mexico before he drifted to Californy. I've seen that bird set in th' door of a saloon and spend an afternoon breakin' dogs' legs with his six-shooter as they trotted along th' street. He's a wonder gunman, Miss Joyce, drunk or sober.

"He's th' cruelest man I ever knew. He loves it. He's like a Gila monster to me. I shudder if I rub shoulders with 'im, and shudderin' don't run in my family neither."

"Where did Noah Littlejohn pick him up?"

"Well, he was hangin' around th' new construction work over at the Nevady end," Slim replied. "That's what a floater told me, anyway. They's some bad ragtowns on th' grade over thataway.

"This bird was actin' as a kind o' bouncer for one o' th' tough dumps. They had a robbin' outfit o' gamblers, ye, savvy, and now and then some stiff would raise a holler when he got cleaned.

"Th' bird that run th' dump was a skinny little man, not able to fight his own battles and back up his crooked stuff, so he hired this hound to throw th' fear o' death into th' squawkers. I guess Noah

heard about 'im and sent for 'im. He wants that kind o' men on Tyrone Ranch, it seems.

"Well, Miss Joyce, I see I'm gonta have to leave ye as soon as Noah drifts in. I'm mighty sorry. I'd like to stick and help ye fight it out. Can't I do anythin' for ye at all? I mean, even if Noah fires me?"

"Yes, you can, Slim," Joyce told him after a pause. Just wait until the bunch shows up, and we'll see what sort of new material Noah intends to run the ranch with. If they don't look good to us, and if Noah does fire you, what you can do for me is this:

"You can ride through Cutthroat Pass and on to the upper reaches of the Pipe-Organ. You'll find the road building camp of Tristram Derry close to the Peddler's Crutch. Lin Columbia is there.

"You can tell him what has happened to me, and tell him that I want his advice. And whatever he tells you to do in the matter, Slim, do it."

"I will," said Slim. "I've heard about that Columbia, ma'am. They say he's a fightin' fool."

"Please call Snipe to supper," said the girl, without comment on Slim's high opinion of the man she loved.

CHAPTER IX.

THE COOK.

FOR a week things rocked along at Tyrone Ranch in pretty much the same old way and without the least excitement. Joyce fed her two hands, and they 'tended to such stock as was in the corrals, mended irrigating ditches, and, somewhat to their disgust, plowed and harrowed a large garden plot.

There were innumerable tasks to be accomplished before the big drive into the mountains; for Tyrone Ranch was something more than a cattle range. There was corn to be planted for the fattening of the hogs, the plowing of fields set apart for the growing of various grains.

The remoteness of the ranch made it necessary to raise many things for the consumption of both man and beast—things usually looked upon with contempt by the average cattleman. Tyrone Ranch, in short, was a producing farm as well as an extensive range for the fattening of beef stock.

It was toward the end of the week, on Saturday afternoon, that Joyce heard a distant, faint rumbling and saw a cloud of dust hanging over the wide trail that wound its way through the waste of chaparral. She knew well the meaning of that distant roar. The advance bunches of the drive were nearing the home ranch, and for at least two days the cows would be coming in, in lots of a thousand or more. The trail that Tyrone had hacked through that solid wall of chaparral, that extended for miles on the south of the ranch, was comparatively narrow.

It was wide for a trail, one might say, and narrow for a wagon road. No vehicle could travel over it because of the up-and-downness of the country. Everything that the ranch needed from outside was packed in on the backs of mules.

Along this trail the cattle would be strung out in a seemingly endless stream. It made the driving easy, once they had been headed into the opening at the other end.

It was two hours before cow-punchers at the head of the first bunch rode out into the opening, with the tired, thirsty, bawling cattle following them. They were urged on from behind by other men, whose shouts the watching girl occasionally heard.

The cows were left to their own devices once they were out of the long thicket-lined chute, except that the men who accompanied them rode about and scattered them so that the mouth of the trail would not be blocked for bunches coming after. Through her binoculars Joyce was able to make sure that none of the *vaqueros* who had ridden in were familiar to her.

But she could not watch for long. The afternoon was passing swiftly, and she did not know how many hungry men she would be obliged to feed before darkness fell. She bustled into her kitchen and set to work, not without a feeling of deep resentment.

She, the ostensible manager of Tyrone Ranch, must toil in the kitchen to feed men whom she had not employed to work for her. As manager of the rancho, she

realized that she was a mere figurehead, and it made her blood boil to think of it.

She would hire a Chinese cook immediately, she told herself. She would send Slim Cook outside in search of one next day.

She would not knuckle down to Noah Littlejohn, slave over the range to feed his gawking gang, and allow him to do as he saw fit with Tyrone Ranch. She would be an object of ridicule in the eyes of the cow-punchers if she submitted meekly and continued to do a woman's work, as in the days before Tyrone's death.

She wondered if Snipe Quimby could cook. It seemed to her now that she remembered his saying something when they were on the trail about cooking for a gang of men at one time in his checkered career. If he could cook, it might be possible for her to keep him employed on the ranch.

Surely Noah Littlejohn would not go so far as to discharge some one whom she had hired for work in the kitchen. He would not be so domineering as to try and manage the domestic affairs of the house as well as the ranch work.

With these thoughts in mind, she hurried to the front door, removed from a nail beside it a long cowhorn, and placed the carved mouthpiece to her lips. She sent several raucous blasts speeding toward the stables and corrals, where she saw Snipe and Slim watching the new men at work with the herd.

Slim started toward the house when he heard the sound, but the girl, by waving her arms and pointing, indicated that it was his companion whom she wished. At once Quimby began hurrying toward her. She went back into the kitchen, and presently his lean knuckles knocked on the door.

She invited him in and seated him before her.

" Snipe," she said, " didn't you tell me on the trail that you are something of a cook?"

" Why, yes'm," he answered. " I've done a little bit of everything, ma'am. I got to flunkyin' in a construction outfit in Colorado, one time, when I couldn't get work on the range anywhere.

" The second cook got drunk on lemon extract and wandered out on the desert, talkin' to 'imself. We let 'im go, thinkin' he'd lay down under a sagebush some place and sleep it off. He didn't come back that day nor the next, and we got worried when another mornin' come and he didn't show up.

" We hunted for 'im—the cook and me —but we hadn't time to do much. Finally th' walkin' boss laid off th' whole gang and put 'em to scourin' the desert for that pot-walloper.

" We never found a bone of 'im, ma'am, and he had over three months' pay comin' to 'im on th' books.

" So that's how I got to be second cook. And by and by, when th' head cook's feet got to ticklin', I stepped into his job and made good. I've cooked a lot since then. But ye ain't needin' a cook, are ye, Miss Joyce? I don't particularly like th' work. I'd rather ride."

" I don't doubt that," Joyce told him. " But I'm afraid, Snipe, that you'll never ride for this outfit. Slim has convinced me that Littlejohn will fire both of you as soon as he reaches the ranch.

" I can't hold Slim. In fact, since I've had a chance to think things over, I believe that I want him to be fired, so that he can work for me outside.

" But I want to keep you. I need friends, Snipe, and what you did for me at Spruce has made me think you will be my friend. If you are, and if you want to stay at Tyrone Ranch and help me, I think the only way you can do it is to put on an apron.

" I won't cook for these men that Littlejohn has hired without consulting me. Come, Snipe—help me out! I need you badly. I haven't told you much about the strange situation here on the ranch, but perhaps you've learned something from Slim Cook."

" Yes'm—Slim, he wised me up a little. I guess I understand."

" Then, take the kitchen right away, Snipe, if you want to stay here. It's the only way, I'm positive. There's no place for an honest man on this ranch for any outside work. I'll promise you something

better at the first opportunity. I'll never forget what you've done for me."

And then a wave of fear swept over the girl. Had she said too much? Dared she trust this man?

"Well," drawled the lank *vaquero*, "if you put it thataway, Miss Joyce, I reckon I'd better climb into an apron. I'll try it for awhile, anyway, till we see how things are comin' out. I like this place. I wanta stay here. I like you."

Here his lean face went fiery red. "But I warn ye that I'm peevish when I get all het up over a cookstove, ma'am. These longhorns that Littlejohn rounded up had better say they like my grub. I cook with a six-gun on my hip, Miss Joyce. I find the butt of her handy for poundin' tough roundsteak sometimes."

"Good for you, Snipe!" laughed the girl. "And let's hope you won't find the roundsteak too tough. Thank you. You *are* my friend. You'll never regret it, Snipe, if—if I win."

"Oh, you'll win, ma'am," the cowpuncher returned lightly. "I see that in yer eye. Ye'll win walkin'. I'm here to see that ye do win.

"Guess I'll jest pin a clean gunnysack around me, ma'am, seein' that ye ain't got any man's apron. I'd sure have to pound roundsteak if the bunch drifted in and saw me blushin' and tryin' to hide behind that handkerchief you're wearin' over yer dress. What's for supper? Gimme th' menu, and I'll try to make th' grade. Roast beef, eh? Well, to-morrow they get hash. And I killed three men and a six-year-old hound dawg one time for kickin' about my hash!"

"I'll get you a helper as soon as I can," promised Joyce. "If Slim leaves soon—which I think will likely happen—I'll have him try to get a Chinaman on the outside."

"I pity that Chinaman," was all that Snipe said as he washed his hands and prepared to take charge of the culinary department of Tyrone Ranch.

In her bedroom, half an hour later, Joyce saw several men, talking loudly, ride past the house toward the corrals. Ten minutes afterward Snipe announced supper by trumpeting with the cowhorn.

She knew when the new hands trooped to the kitchen door, heard their rough laughter as they splashed in the basins that sat on a bench under a spreading oak, and afterward the familiar shuffle of feet and the scrape of chairs as they entered and took their places at the table.

She sighed deeply, leaned back, and looked through her window across the beautiful country that lay before her. Red cattle were dotted over the landscape as they wandered in small bunches toward the distant mountain meadows. They kept up their plaintive bawling, although the sounds grew more and more intermittent as they settled down after the gruelling drive.

She would eat later with the cook, Joyce told herself, or have him serve her in the living room. Always, in the old days, she and her mother had eaten with the ranch hands at the long table in the kitchen. But the old days were gone forever. A new order of things had descended upon Tyrone Ranch.

There came a knock on her door.

"Who is it?" she asked sharply.

"It's jest me, ma'am," announced Snipe Quimby.

"Open the door, then," invited Joyce.

"They's a jasper in this gang says he's got a note for ye," Snipe informed her, looking in.

"All right. Tell him you'll deliver it to me, Snipe."

"That's what I done told 'im, ma'am. But he says he's got instructions to place it in your hands 'imself. He looks to me like another o' these here insistin' cusses that always get me fussed up."

"Tell him that I'm not coming out," the girl ordered. "If I choose to have you receive and deliver my messages, that's none of his affairs."

"I'll slip 'im that," said Snipe. "I hope and trust he don't get to insistin' agin, because I seem to be mighty nervous to-night. I don't like that bunch o' skulls out there, ma'am. While I ain't one o' these here science hounds, there's bumps on them birds' beans like you see in reward notices for wanted men."

"Don't start any trouble, Snipe," she warned.

"Oh, trouble never troubles me," he returned. "I get fat on it. Havin' trouble with them fussy vacationists at the summer resort is what made me put on them two pounds o' weight that Slim Cook noticed so quick. I'll get that message, Miss Joyce."

He withdrew his apologetic eyes from her face and softly closed the door. Snipe seemed to be something of a contradiction. He appeared to be the soul of meekness and bashful beyond measure, yet at the same time he did not seem to shrink from any sort of encounter with his fellow men.

He crossed the living room with long, indolent strides, opened the kitchen door, and pulled it to behind him as noiselessly as he had closed the door of Joyce's room.

Five cow-punchers were seated at the long, oilcloth covered table, eating greedily. All glanced up quickly as the cook reentered the room, and the look in their eyes showed that conversation about him had been in progress while he was away. Nobody said anything as Snipe crossed to the man who sat at the head of the table.

"Brother," he said, leaning over the shoulder of Scarface Hyde, "I don't know yer name, but mine's Snipe Quimby. I'm jest recently from White Woman Falls, which same is a summer resort in these here magnificent mountains. Before that I rode with th' boys on Rattlebox Ranch, south o' th' Tehachapi. Have ye ever heard o' th' Rattlebox Ranch, brother?"

Scarface looked up with a snarl on his lips. Squat, dark, with his little insolent eyes and the hideous scar that stretched from mouth to ear, he was the personification of the word "tough" as it is commonly applied to the character of a man.

"No," he returned, "I never heard tell o' th' Rattlebox outfit. Did they use a nursin' bottle, too?"

"Not anyways noticeable," Quimby told him. "They took kinder to red-eye, and they rode hard and long and pretty. They worked hard and they drank hard and they played hard. They was a pretty rough accumulation, takin' 'em all in all, but they was always polite to a lady.

"Yes, sir—plumb polite when a lady said this or that or th' other thing. And if a lady ast one o' them Rattlebox boys to do somethin' for her, why he jest naturally done it.

"F'rinstance, suppose a lady was to ast one o' them Rattlebox boys to go to a man that had a message fer her, and say to 'im, polite like, 'Brother, Miss Lady is indisposed and don't want to mingle with th' herd at present, so she ast me to tell ye to give that message to me,' then this fella he'd be talkin' to would take into consideration that this here was a Rattlebox boy, and he'd deliver that message at once."

"Well, what's it all about, cook?" growled Scarface.

"Why, that's what Miss Joyce told me to tell you, brother," replied Snipe. "And I'm from th' Rattlebox Ranch, south o' th' Tehachapi."

Scarface Hyde lowered his eyes to the oilcloth and toyed with his fork. The four cow-punchers over whom he seemed to be the boss watched him closely.

"You're gonta be fired as soon as th' manager o' this ranch gets here," he said to Quimby, without looking up. "I'm thinkin' ye're a bit too fresh."

"Granted," replied Snipe, and his tone was a soft purring. "And I reckon that maybe I will get fired. But that ain't got anythin' to do with you givin' me that note to Miss Joyce Larue, so's I c'n deliver it into her hands. I'd thank ye for it, brother. Miss Joyce she's waitin'."

Another ominous pause. Then, from Scarface in an angry mumble: "And what if I don't?"

"Ah! Now we're gettin' down to business. Why, if ye can't see yer way clear to complyin' with th' lady's request, brother, then I'll have to take it away from ye."

"That sounds like fightin' talk to me," said Scarface.

"I'm willin' to confess," Snipe drawled on, "that, in certain outfits that I've come up with in my time, th' sounds I jest croaked would be considered what ye might call belligerent vowels and consonants. Jest th' same, brother, I'm astin' ye fer that letter immediate."

There followed another ominous pause. Scarface still played with his fork, and his mean little eyes were still abased. He

glanced up finally, to discover a man across from him winking at him craftily. The man's eyes widened and he pursed his lips, slightly shaking his head. It was a warning.

Then Snipe's big brown hand was stretched out above the table. "Come, fella," he said softly. "Last call for dinner in th' dinin' car."

Scarface sat staring at the man who sat opposite him at the table. This man continued to signal his warning; and, with a low growl of rage, the squat cow-puncher reached into his shirt pocket and withdrew a dirty envelope.

He glanced up once, his eyes green with wrath, as he laid the missive in Snipe's broad palm. Then he lowered his glance again and nervously picked up his knife.

"I thank ye, brother," said the cook. "I'll take it to th' lady right away."

He walked around behind Scarface and lounged toward the door to the living room amid a suggestive silence. He reached forth a hand to grasp the knob of the door. Then like a top he spun about, and the hand that had been advanced held an enormous, single-action Colt, which had been whipped suddenly from beneath his short burlap apron.

"Too slow, brother," he drawled, complacently eying the muzzle of Scarface Hyde's six-shooter, which was peeping up above the top of the table. "But if ye was thinkin' o' bringin' her up farther, don't let me interfere."

For a long moment Scarface and the cook eyed each other, neither making a move. Then the man who had warned the squat boss of the drive succumbed to the strain and hoarsely cried:

"Don't try it, Scarface. Drop it quick! That's Snipe-shooter Quinn that's throwin' down on ye! man! Ye're dead if ye raise that gun! He's th' champion shot o' th' whole blamed West!"

There followed a short moment of silence, then a resounding thump as the six-gun fell on the floor beneath Hyde's chair.

"I see I'm discovered at last," said the mild-voiced cook as he opened the door with one hand behind him and backed through. "I'm Snipe-shooter Quinn, gentlemen—at your service."

He closed the door and turned about to face Joyce Larue, who had been listening in the next room.

CHAPTER X.

ORDERS FROM THE BOSS.

WHEN the fighting cook backed from the kitchen into the living room and turned to find himself face to face with Joyce, a great change came over his lengthy features.

"Why, ma'am," he said, "I didn't know ye was here. A second more and I might 'a' had this here gun on ye, all fussed up as I was from that little medicine show in there. Ye was listenin' through th' keyhole, wasn't ye?" He eyed her closely.

"I—I just got here," Joyce returned. "I was wondering what kept you so long, so I—I thought I'd investigate, if I could, without showing myself in there."

He towered above her, looking down into her face. Little wrinkles came at the corners of his apologetic-looking eyes, and he seemed to be thinking deeply.

"Did ye get here in time to hear anythin', ma'am?" he questioned.

"I heard voices raised rather high," she replied. "I was afraid there was going to be trouble." She glanced down at the six-shooter in his hand. "There was some trouble, wasn't there, Snipe?"

"Well, what you might call th' beginnin' o' trouble," he told her. "One o' them boys allowed to throw down on me when my back was turned, but them eyes in th' back o' my head caught 'im in th' act, and I was so scared that I turned around and beat 'im on th' draw. Nothin' much, ma'am. Ye heard about all of it, I guess."

It seemed to Joyce that, for once in her life at least, it was time to lie and lie cleverly. She had heard of Snipe-shooter Quinn. His unsavory reputation was wide-spread over Nevada and California.

He was accounted one of the most deadly gunmen in the entire West. High-grader, hold-up man, robber of gold dredges, the various stories of his wild career had traveled from the Canadian line to the Mexican border. Joyce had good reason to lie in

order to make him believe that she had not discovered his identity.

"I—I heard you tell somebody that he was too slow," she stammered, "and I also heard the click of the hammer as you cocked your gun. Then I—I put both fingers into my ears. I was terribly frightened, thinking that a gun fight was about to take place beyond that door."

The cook continued to look down upon her speculatively. Then a faint smile crossed his wide lips. "*You* put *them* fingers in *them* ears," he asked, "to keep from hearin' th' noise of six-guns?"

"Yes. I was frightened."

"I'd like to feel your pulse," he said, "but that wouldn't be polite. I'm sorry I scared ye with my rough-neck business, Miss Joyce." There was a world of mockery in his soft voice. "I'll try to behave hereafter. But how was I to know ye was hidin' behind this here door?

"However, here's yer note. That gentleman give her to me for ye. I'll drift back in now and set some warm biscuits on th' table. If ye need me, holler. I hope they ain't nothin' in that note, ma'am, that's liable to make ye faint."

He gave her a quizzical smile, and, holstering his gun beneath his ridiculous gunny-sack apron, went into the kitchen once more.

"I didn't fool him!" was the thought that raced through the *mestizo's* mind as she hurried to her room with the dirty note. "He knows that I heard his name. Oh, what is he doing here? Small John Copper sent him, so Scarface and the men he picked don't know him. And Small John hasn't come yet to introduce him.

"Snipe-shooter Quinn has been hired by Noah Littlejohn, the same as the rest of them, but he's keeping quiet until either Small John or Noah comes to tell the others that he is one of them and all right. And I trusted him! He's merely pretending friendship in order to deceive me!"

This last was a low wail, which came from her lips as she threw herself on her bed.

"A notorious outlaw—a killer!" she cried into her pillow. "And like a piece of putty in the hands of Littlejohn, I hired him myself! Oh, haven't I one friend left in the world?"

She arose presently and dried her eyes, then sat close to the window again to read the note that Scarface had brought to the ranch for her.

She knew before she removed the single sheet of note paper which the envelope contained that the message was from Littlejohn. She read:

DEAR JOYCE:

i am on my feet again and expect to be at the ranch in a fue days. They aint going to try to keep me here in camp at the peddlers crutch, for Lin columbia says for them to let me go.

by this time you know i guess that I am to be the manager of tyrone ranch for a year. that was what ozias Tyrone told me he would do for me and i knew he had made out his will that way.

I didn't say anything to you about this when you come to see me here in my tent for i didnt know but maybe ozias had changed his will and not told me anything about it. But now I know he didnt change it. a certain party come into camp here and told me so.

So yore going to have me with you for at least a year wether you want me or not. i have used my infloence and hired some men to work for us. One of them will give you this note.

I have appointed him as forman of the ranch till i can get there and you will please do whatever he says. His name is Scarface Hyde and he's a good man.

you might as well tell that no good slim cook to beat it right away for im going to tie a can to him if hes still there when i reach the ranch. And if you have hired anybody else fire them too, because i've picked all the men I want and they suit me exactly.

hoping that you are satisfied with the way your step-father disposed of his property and that you and me will get along fine together, i remain

Yrs devotedly
NOAH LITTLEJOHN.

Joyce read the crude letter again and again, and her hazel eyes blazed with anger at the insolence of it. She would not discharge Slim Cook. Littlejohn could attend to that matter himself after he had arrived at Tyrone Ranch.

She needed Slim now. Of the seven cowhands on the ranch, he seemed to be the only one that was her friend. She needed him, and, if he would stay, she meant to keep him as long as possible.

She pondered over Littlejohn's instruc-

tions to discharge any men that she might have hired. The only one who was there at her instigation was the new cook, Quimby, or Quinn.

It seemed to her that Littlejohn's orders regarding him were designed to pull the wool over her eyes. She was confident that Small John Copper had directed him to go to her at Spruce and apply for a job.

Perhaps Small John had done this on his own initiative, realizing, when he met Quinn, that here was the type of man that Noah Littlejohn would want. So he had told the outlaw, perhaps, something of what was in the wind out at Tyrone Ranch, and suggested that he join the band of near cutthroats which Littlejohn was recruiting. Later Small John, whom she believed to be in constant touch with Noah, would go to his boss and tell him what he had done.

Of course Littlejohn would be pleased and flattered because such a notorious character as Quinn had condescended to join his forces. But Small John had not had a chance to notify the rest of Noah's new men that the one who would travel to the ranch with Joyce was the well-known gunman of Nevada and California. Hence the little scene just enacted in the kitchen.

But one of the men had recognized him, and had warned Scarface Hyde that he was playing with fire when he attempted to draw with the lanky outlaw. So they knew now who he was.

Would they make friends with him? It all depended on what Littlejohn had in mind for the future. It seemed to Joyce that he was attempting to get together another gang of highwaymen, such as Black Ozias had commanded before his death. If this were so, the five who had ridden in with the foremost divisions of the drive would welcome him.

She decided to make a test of her theory. She would see this odious Scarface at once and ask him if he was familiar with the contents of the note that he had carried to her. If he were not—which she doubted—she would show him the missive, and point out the sentence wherein Noah had commanded her to discharge any men that she might have hired.

Then she would tell Snipe-shooter Quinn that he must go. If Scarface failed to back her up, and gave indications that he did not want Quinn to leave the rancho, it would be plain that the outlaw had been sent there by Noah and that he was destined to become one of the gang.

It might prove, too, that he had told Scarface his secret, since the scene in the kitchen, divulging that he was there to make her think she had hired him, and was her friend, so that he might gain her confidence and help Noah in whatever plans he had in mind. For she fully believed now that Quinn was Littlejohn's spy.

There was no time like the present. She would go into the kitchen at once and have it over with. Bucking up her courage, she glanced at her face in the mirror, made certain that it showed no signs of recent weeping, and went into the living room.

She crossed in front of the huge stone fireplace and, stepping softly, reached the kitchen door. Here she paused, listening. She had been in hopes of overhearing something to her advantage.

She wanted to discover Quinn in amiable conversation with Hyde, which would prove that the situation had been explained and an understanding reached. But she heard no voices, even though she took the risk of placing her ear to the keyhole once more. The only sounds that reached her were those made by the knives and forks of the greedy diners.

She opened the door and stepped through to face the new ordeal.

All five of the new men were still seated at the long table. All were busy eating. The man who sat at the table's head, Scarface Hyde, was particularly interested in his food, and kept his small eyes constantly on his plate.

His face was flushed from his recent emotion. At the sink stood Quinn, scraping pots and pans before plunging them into the dishwater. No one seemed to have observed that the girl had entered.

Joyce stood very still in the doorway and surveyed the group closely. There was no indication whatever that a word which might lead to an understanding had been spoken since the cook returned to the kitch-

en to continue his duties. The atmosphere was decidedly strained.

Joyce knew men pretty well—cow-punchers in particular—and she believed that there was trouble in the air here. Still, they might be acting a part—all of them, Snipe-shooter might have told them when he reëntered that he had caught her listening through the keyhole. This would put them on their guard and cause them to pretend.

She cleared her throat. The five at the table looked up quickly at the sound, and Quinn spun about at the sink. Surely this was not acting. It seemed to be genuine. They were thoroughly surprised.

The face of the new boss went red, and his little eyes narrowed as they surveyed her. Nobody spoke, but all at the table had ceased eating and continued to stare at her.

Quinn was the only one to display indifference after his initial show of surprise. He turned back to his work immediately, and a raucous scraping followed the movement.

Joyce stepped toward the table and came to a halt a few feet from Scarface.

"Mr. Hyde," she said, "I have read the note that you brought from Littlejohn. Since it was sealed, I am wondering if you know what the note contained."

"No'm," replied Scarface in a tone that belied the declaration. "It was give to me by a fella that had seen Noah a little while back, and I was told to give it to you and nobody else. I don't savvy what was in th' note."

"Very well," said Joyce. "Then I'd like to have you read it and carry out the instructions that Littlejohn wrote."

She stepped closer and laid the note beside his plate. "Please pardon me for interrupting you while you are eating," she said. "No hurry. Read the note when you have finished, and let me know what you will do in the matter."

"I'm through eatin' right now," declared Scarface, picking up the piece of paper. "I'll look her over."

He leaned back, and Joyce saw thick lips moving as he perused the missive. Finally he squinted up at her, and his jaw muscles were working so that the scar that extended from his mouth to his ear was alternately brown and white.

"Well," he remarked, "seems like the only instructions Noah give is to fire this Slim Cook."

"And anybody whom I may have hired," added Joyce.

Scarface glanced about the board. Immediately the four *vaqueros* became interested in their food once more. The squat man scraped his boot heels on the floor, looked a trifle nervous, and shot one swift look at the silent giant before the sink.

"Well," he remarked, "I guess Noah got a little too previous when he wrote these here orders, Joyce."

"Miss Joyce, please," said the girl angrily. "I've corrected you before about that, Mr. Hyde."

"All right—all right!" he retorted crossly. "We got no time to fuss about that now. I wanted to say that I guess I won't fire anybody at all until Noah gets here. Let him do th' firin'. I don't want to cause any hard feelin's."

"But you'll fire Slim, won't you?"

"Noah told *you* to do that, didn't he?"

"But you're temporary foreman of the ranch," the girl reminded him. "I'm merely the owner's daughter. It's true that I am acting for my mother during her absence, but I don't care to have anything more to do with the hiring or firing of hands."

"I don't want none of it in mine," he returned, shaking his head. "Noah, he told you to do it, not me. He also told ye to do whatever I said, didn't he?" He grinned at her malevolently. "Then I say, if ye're bound to take Noah at his word and fire somebody, hop to it. I'm firin' nobody till Noah hits th' rancho."

"Well, I mean to carry out Noah's commands," Joyce informed him, though it hurt to say it. "He has ordered Slim Cook discharged. Also anybody whom I may have hired on my own initiative. So my cook must go, too. I hired him.

"Snipe"—she was careful to use the name that he had given her—"I guess it's on the cards for you to *vamos*. Sorry, old-timer. I'll pay you well for the time you wasted in coming out with me. I'd like to

keep you, but my boss says you'll have to go."

The tall man turned from the sink and looked at her mournfully with his apologetic eyes. He glanced from her to Scarface. It was Hyde who broke the silence.

"Now, looky-here, Miss Joyce," he said, "I wouldn't go off half-cocked, if I was you. Noah mighta meant just what he said when he wrote them there orders, but if he was here now he'd change his mind.

"This fella is a rattlin' good cook. I jest tested his cookin', and he sure suits me. A good ranch cook is a treasure, ye know. I'm thinkin' ye picked a pretty good one.

"We'd look a long ways before we found another one to take this bird's place. I'm thinkin' we better let th' matter o' firin' 'im go until th' boss comes, and I c'n explain how things stands."

"Then you'll accept all responsibility, will you?" asked the girl.

"Certainly—certainly! You leave things to me, Joy—er—Miss Joyce. Noah'll be glad ye didn't go to work and fire this fella when he tastes one of his biscuits."

"All right," the *mestizo* returned, starting toward the door. "I wash my hands of it. The cook remains, then, until Littlejohn comes. And how about Slim Cook?"

"Oh, ye c'n put th' skids under him any time ye want to," replied Scarface Hyde. "He's no good, anyway."

Joyce closed the door behind her and crossed the living room to her own part of the great house, fully convinced that it was not Quinn's biscuits that made him indispensable to Scarface and the new gang that was coming into being on Tyrone Ranch.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DUMMY.

IT was not until after Joyce had eaten her supper in the kitchen, served silently by the tall man with the burlap apron, that she realized Slim Cook had not been at the table with the new *vaqueros*. She was again in her room when this occurred to her.

She wanted to see Slim, anyway. She had decided to discharge him next morning, as the deaf dictator of the ranch had ordered. But it was not in obedience to Littlejohn's command that she meant to take this step.

She wanted to have a secret conference with Slim, tell him just where she stood, and send him to Lin Columbia. Slim could help her better in her predicament, she thought, if he were absent from Tyrone Ranch, and acting as secret messenger between herself and Lin.

She arose from her chair and went into the kitchen, where she found the new cook preparing to leave the house for the night. It was almost dark, and she could barely see his face.

"I wish you'd tell Slim that I'd like to see him right away," said Joyce.

"All right, ma'am—I'll do that," the man replied.

She waited, saying nothing, while he completed some small task, removed his ridiculous apron, and put on his hat.

"Good night," he said, and started for the door. But he paused when he reached it, and turned about. She felt rather than saw that his eyes were resting on her face.

"Gonta keep me as cook, ma'am?" he asked.

"Scarface seems to be the boss about here at present," the girl replied. "He seems to have taken a liking to you."

"He didn't show it noticeable when he made to throw down on me with his six to-day," Snipe declared.

"I think he's pretty much of a bluffer," Joyce remarked cautiously. "When you called him, he seemed to like it, in a way. You made a good dog out of him—for the time being, anyway. And I guess he really likes your cooking. That gave him an excuse to pretend that he wants you to stay. Between you and me, though, I think he's afraid to fire you."

Through the faint light she watched his face for the effect of her words, but, as always, it remained passive, unreadable.

"He ain't got any call to be scared o' me, ma'am," the man said finally. "I jest happened to think maybe he'd go into action as I was passin' through th' door,

so I spins about all ready to add my smoke to any cloudiness that might be showin' in here.

"I was a mite too fast for 'im, and his gun arm went dead before his shootin'-iron was well above th' table. I jest had th' drop—that's all. He wouldn't 'a' tried to go any farther if a ten-year-old boy had been coverin' 'im.

"No, I don't think I got him scared a bit. He played good, safe gun-poker—that's all."

"Then he certainly likes your cooking," Joyce repeated. "And I guess he realizes that good ranch cooks are scarce. So he's willing to seem to forget your little difference and try to smooth things over."

"Maybe so, ma'am—maybe so. I'd like to stay and help ye. I c'n see there's somethin' funny goin' on about this ranch. If Slim fogs it outa here, I'm thinkin' I'll be about yer only friend on th' place. I sized that outfit up to-day as a plumb cultus bunch."

"I want you to stay, too, Snipe," she told him, endeavoring to put earnestness into her tone. "And I think you will. Good night. Don't forget to tell Slim I want to see him, please."

"I won't," he replied, and went out and closed the door.

Ten minutes later there came a tap, and when the *mestizo* invited "Come," Slim Cook entered and jerked off his broad-brimmed hat.

"Slim," Joyce began, "you didn't eat supper with the rest of the boys this evening."

"No'm," said Slim. "I tole ye what I think of Scarface Hyde. Th' rest o' that bunch look to me like they was stripped off th' same side o' leather. I et afterwards with Snipe Quimby."

"Slim," the girl told him, "I guess you'll have to fork your horse and hit the trail to-morrow morning. Hyde says he won't need you."

"I thought as much," said the *vaquero* gloomily. "And you got nothin' to say in th' matter a-tall, eh?"

"It seems not. But don't worry about working for me, Slim. I want you to continue doing that, and you won't have to work so hard, either. I am glad that Hyde is firing you. That gives me an alibi.

"I want you to get in touch at once with Lin Columbia, up at the Peddler's Crutch and tell him all that has happened here on the ranch. I've still some things to tell you that you don't know. Something happened here in the kitchen at supper this evening that you must hear about before you go to the Peddler's Crutch.

"But I don't like to tell you here in the house. There is an old saying, you know, that the walls have ears. Suppose you return unconcernedly to the bunk-house, and, fifteen minutes afterward, go outside and hurry over to the big oak at the edge of the Grimm alfalfa field. I'll be there waiting for you. We can talk freely there."

"All right," Slim agreed, and started to take his leave.

But he turned before he had reached the door. "Say," he announced, "I got what ye might call a brilliant scheme, Miss Joyce. Le's make 'em think we're still here in th' kitchen, talkin' to each other. Then maybe we can say what we got to say over at th' old oak, and sneak back here to see if anybody is interestin' 'imself in th' kitchen window."

"Slim, just what are you talking about?" she asked.

"Listen, Miss Joyce," he said: "To-day I found somethin' funny in that little draw that runs east and west beyond th' corn field. I was ridin' over thataway, and I saw a coyote sneakin' around at th' edge o' th' timber. I was tryin' to get close to 'im so's I would have a better shot, and I rode down into the draw and followed it, with my head bent till it was below th' level o' th' field above.

"My horse stumbled over somethin' buried in th' sand, and, as I was lookin' down at th' time, I saw it. His hoofs had shoved it part way outa th' sand, but I didn't know what it was just then. I let it go, and rode on down th' draw after that ole coyote. He got wind o' me comin', though, and beat it into th' timber before I could get a shot at 'im.

"Then I rides back to have a look at what th' *caballo* had kicked outa th' sand. It had been buried about six inches deep,

in order to hide it, ye know. And it was th' funniest thing ye ever saw."

"Well, what on earth was it? Please explain."

"It was the head and shoulders of a man," said Slim.

The *mestizo's* hazel eyes widened and her lips stood apart as she gazed through the gloom at the cow-puncher.

"Slim Cook," she cried, "what *are* you talking about? You found the head and shoulders of a man buried in the sand in that little ravine? Slim, are you crazy?"

"No'm, I ain't crazy," he maintained. "It wasn't th' reg'lar head and shoulders of a man, ye savvy. Jest a—well, ye might call it an idol, maybe."

"Go on—explain! I know you're crazy now!"

"No—listen. I jest don't know how to say it, that's all. But this here was a paper head and shoulders. And they was a frame around it made outa green willow boughs. I mean that green willow boughs had been bent till they looked like a man's head and shoulders, and tied. Then dark-brown wrappin' paper had been pasted over th' frame.

"So if ye stood that thing up, say an eighth of a mile away, ye'd think ye was lookin' at a man layin' on th' ground, with his head and shoulders raised."

"For heaven's sake!" gasped the girl. "The shadow on the veranda floor!"

"Exactly, Miss Joyce. I was goin' to come here to-night to tell ye about it, after Snipe had left th' house; and then he comes and tells me ye wanta see me. When ye said, 'Le's go over to th' big oak at th' edge o' th' Grimm alfalfy field to have our talk,' I thinks I'll tell ye about it when we get there. Then I get that there brilliant idea."

"Well, what is your idea?"

"We'll light th' lamp right now," Slim explained. "Fine business that ye hadn't already lit it. But first we'll pull down th' shade of that window that looks toward th' bunk-house. We'll set th' lamp on th' table here, and you'll set down between th' lamp and th' window shade. That'll make your shadow show on th' shade, and they c'n see her from th' bunk-house.

"Then, leavin' you settin' there like ye was talkin' with me, I'll sneak out to th' draw and get that there paper dummy thing that looks like th' head and shoulders of a man. I buried her again, jest where I found her.

"I'll bring her out here at a gallop, and we'll walk past th' window two or three times, mixin' our shadows up; and finally drop on th' floor. And when we get away from it, we'll leave that thing settin' on a chair. From th' bunk-house it'll look jest like you was sittin' there talkin' to me, or me talkin' to you. We'll sneak over to th' big oak and say what we gotta say, or else slip back here and hide, to see what happens. Sound good, Miss Joyce?"

"It's worth a trial," she said. "Let's get busy."

They lowered the window shade, moved the kitchen work table so that it was opposite the window, and Joyce sat down between the table and the lowered shade. Then Slim lighted the lamp.

"Now jest set there," he said. "I'm sure your shadow's showin' through. I'll sneak out by th' front door, make a big circle, get a horse outa th' corral, and ride like th' dickens after that dummy. I'll be back in ten minutes.

"Don't move much while I'm gone. Jest set kinda still. Then they won't suspicion anythin' when they don't see th' dummy movin' later."

Slim was back within the time that he had promised. She heard him softly entering the front door, and soon he was in the kitchen, with the object that he had described in his hands.

"Here she is," he announced in a husky whisper. "C'n ye beat it, Miss Joyce? I reckon you and me's gonta do a lot o' puzzlin' over this toy before we're through with it. But we ain't got time now."

Slim now carried out the subtle maneuvers that he had outlined; and when he had completed them the dummy was propped up on the chair that the girl had occupied, between the drawn window shade and the lighted lamp.

"Good!" he chuckled. "There I'm settin', for all they know, all th' time we'll be outside together. Le's go careful and

make no noise, and slip out th' front door o' th' house."

They were almost positive that no one at the bunk-house could see them as they stole from the front veranda into the night, and slipped along in the shadow of the house until they reached the corner farthest from the sleeping quarters of the men. Here they lay flat on the ground and crawled away through the darkness.

"Le's not go to th' ole oak a-tall, ma'am," Slim suggested, when they thought it safe to talk in whispers. "Le's crawl clean around on th' other side and hide in th' grass, where we c'n watch that window. We c'n lay there and talk, and at th' same time be gettin' a line on anythin' that might be takin' place near th' house."

"All right," Joyce agreed. "You lead the way."

Ten minutes later, panting from the unaccustomed exertion, they came to rest some distance from the house, with the silhouette showing plainly before them.

"That's fine! That's fine!" chuckled the *vaquero*. "That'd fool anybody, wouldn't it, Miss Joyce? Now if anybody has sneaked from th' bunk-house to try and find out what's goin' on between you and me, we got a chance to see 'em. Now tell me what ye got to say to me. I'll listen and watch."

"I find that I want to talk about that queer thing you found in the ravine," said the girl. "But we must let that go until later. I'm going to tell you everything that happened in the kitchen to-day. I want you to know everything before you go to Lin for me."

"All right," said Slim. "Le' me hear it all."

Then, in a whisper, she told him all that she knew—about the little fracas in the kitchen—and of her overhearing one of the cowboys cry out that the cook was Snipe-shooter Quinn.

"Great bobcats!" gasped Slim, when he heard this last. "What's he doin' here?"

"I think that Small John Copper saw him at Spruce, and, knowing that Noah would be tickled to death to have such a notorious character in the bunch of roughnecks that he's getting together, John told Snipe-shooter to hit me for a job. He intended to explain to Noah what he had done when next he saw him, no doubt.

"Small John evidently outlined Littlejohn's entire plot against mother and me, and it sounded good to Snipe-shooter. So he came out here with me, making me believe that I had hired him, trusting to luck to make himself known to Scarface and the others. He had to play up to me, of course, and pretend to be on my side.

"So he put on that little show about getting Noah's note away from Scarface for me, to make me think he was my friend. He had no fear of Scarface, nor of any of the others. He knew he could take care of himself, and was running but little risk.

"I think, too, that he knew I was listening at the keyhole. So, instead of whispering to Scarface that he was intending to become one of the gang when things had been straightened out, and telling him that it would be wise for him to deliver the note to him, he got it by a more primitive method. All that, mind you, to convince me, listening or peeping through the keyhole, that he was fighting for me.

"Then, as he reached the door on his way back to my room, one of the men, who had recognized him as Quinn, cried out the truth and spoiled his play. I lied deliberately in an effort to make him believe that I hadn't heard that, but I don't think I deceived him.

"So now you know all of it, Slim. And I want you to start out to go to Lin at the Peddler's Crutch to-morrow. When you reach the divide tell Lin everything that I have told you, and—"

"Listen!" Slim interrupted. "Look there! There goes somebody sneakin' toward th' house. I told ye that dummy would do th' business. I wonder who it is, and if there's any chance for me to crawl up and—Sufferin' bobcats! What's that?"

A brilliant light had suddenly burst upon the two watchers as they lay in the tall grass, thinking themselves hidden from all the world. Slim scrambled to his bony knees and turned about, for the white brilliancy flooded them from behind. Joyce,

too, had rolled over and was sitting up, her eyes blinking into a round disk of radiance that nearly blinded her.

"Jest a flashlight, Joyce," said a voice. "Don't be skeered. It's only me, th' best friend ye got on earth. Keep calm."

The light darted away for an instant, then showed again. A hand at the end of a long arm was holding it so that it lighted the face of the man who carried it. Indescribably weird was the effect of that white light playing only upon the ghost-white, peeled-looking face and the inflamed blood-hound eyes of Noah Littlejohn, dictator of Tyrone Ranch.

"Sufferin' bobcats!" cried Slim again. "It's Noah Littlejohn! But, Miss Joyce, he never heard a word we said! He's deef! Thank heaven for that!"

A devilish grin spread itself over the skull-like face of Noah Littlejohn, and then the light was whisked away.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

A MODERN WASHERWOMAN

MY hours are from nine till four—
I want this understood—
With dinner on the stroke of twelve,
And good, substantial food.
There must be meat and fish, and greens
From garden and from field;
I'm not so keen on sweet desserts—
Just fruits that orchards yield.

I hope you have a nice garage
To store my limousine,
With filtered water from a tap,
And oil and gasoline.
I like the washtubs to be made
Of marble that is new,
Although if built of iron-plate,
I'll try to make them do.

My helper comes an hour before,
To get things under way,
So please be prompt with clothes and line—
I cannot brook delay.
I only use the best of soap,
In order not to mar
The strength of hand that is required
To drive my private car.

Please have the washer right in place,
The ringer close beside,
And all attachments made secure,
Electric currents tried.
At five I bathe and take a nap,
Then sup and drive away
To some good moving-picture house—
My fee is five per day.

Franklin Pierce Carrigan.

On the Mojave Trail

By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

AS the white moon slipped beneath the horizon, the black shadows swallowed up the weird, desert scenery. In the east a pale glow announced the approach of dawn.

There followed a brief interval during which the desert became an indistinct, blurred shadow—then the east flamed with red, orange and crimson. With startling rapidity the forms of cacti, yucca, Joshua trees, sagebrush and greasewood took outline.

A cool, mysterious breeze slipped over the sandy waste, a tranquil quiet as though nature was gathering her forces, then—the sun leaped over the mountains, shot its long, level rays across the desert, and immediately it became hot—a dry, stifling, heat which sapped the vitality.

Jake Hand shuffled along through the sand, his faithful burro plodding on behind. They had been on the march for three hours.

Wise in the ways of the desert, realizing the heat of the day which was to come, Jake had taken advantage of the cool period of moonlight to slip twelve sandy miles behind him.

A long, narrow band of roadway appeared, gleaming in the dazzling radiance of early morning. Jake opened his china-blue eyes to their widest extent and scanned the highway.

When Jake opened his eyes in that manner there was a look of sublime innocence and childish sincerity upon his bronzed features which labeled him as one of nature's noblemen, a simple child of the great outdoors, guileless, unsophisticated. As a matter of fact, Jake was the greatest extemporaneous liar on the Mojave Desert!

"Well, Aristotle, shuffle 'long. Here's where we cross the road between Los Angeles, th' city o' the angels, and Reno, Nevada, th' place where th' angels really are—Heh-heh- heh!"

Jake's laugh was a dry, sandy cackle. Aristotle shuffled along, showing his rec-

ognition of the voice by the faintest possible motion of one ear. He had been named by his master following a discussion with a mining engineer in Randsburg, who had opined that Aristotle "was the greatest mind in Congress." The engineer was a trifle hazy in his mental operations at the time due to the fact that Randsburg was one of the last places in the United States to hear that the Constitution had been amended.

Jake, however, had seized upon the name with glee. It had a quality of rolling over his tongue in a manner highly pleasing, and, somehow it sounded sort of musical. Aristotle his burro had become, and Aristotle he remained.

"Well, Aristotle, ole kid, here comes an ottymobile, burnin' up th' road hell bent fer 'lection. I reckon them folks won't stop fer a chat with an ole prospector, but, anyhow we can yell at 'em as they go past. We ain't seen a human, two-legged critter fer two weeks now."

The machine came roaring and swaying along the highway. Jake straightened his bent frame, smoothed out the red bandanna handkerchief which draped around his neck, and stared at the oncoming automobile.

Then he rubbed his eyes and stared again. There was something queer about the appearance of the man at the wheel. Jake couldn't make it out exactly—sort of black and white effect.

There came an explosion, much like the sound of a revolver and the z-z-z-zing-g-g of a bullet glancing from a rock. Hastily and instinctively Jake swung a practiced hand toward his right hip—then cackled again:

"Heh-heh-heh! There goes a tire on that there ottymobile, an' I thought she was a gun. Heh-heh-heh! Now I guess she'll stop and we'll see what's the big idea o' th' uniform."

True to his predictions, the machine lurched and swayed over the highway and came to a halt not a hundred yards from the old prospector. A man and a woman jumped from the car and Jake's startled eyes informed him of the fact that both were attired in corect evening dress.

An expensive cloak covered the shoulders of the woman, but only partially concealed her low cut gown and bare arms. The gleaming shirt of her escort loomed white and dazzling in the glare of the desert sunlight.

"Giddy ap, Aristotle, Giddy ap!" chirped Jake.

Engrossed in the task of taking off the tire, the pair did not notice the old prospector as he silently shambled up through the deep sand.

The man had removed his coat, placed a jack under the machine and was engaged in unscrewing the lugs on the rim. Perspiration poured from his flushed brow in streams, streaking the desert dust which had collected on his cheeks. His eyes were bloodshot, his manner irritable.

The woman was pale. She looked frightened as well as exhausted. A great mass of dark hair piled above her high, white forehead. In spite of the somewhat gaunt appearance of her cheeks it was apparent that she was a woman of charm and beauty.

The man smothered an oath.

"Just my luck! The spare is flat and I'll have to get this casing off the rim, put in another tube and pump it up."

The woman made no comment. Apparently she felt none was expected. The remark had been made as though the man in some way blamed the woman for the accident.

Then Jake noticed something else. The man was afraid. His hand trembled and his eyes kept looking back down the road.

"Oh dear!" breathed the woman in a tired sigh. "I keep thinking of Marjorie. What *will* she think? God knows I'm a wicked woman to run away with you, George, and I'm just beginning to get a taste of my punishment. Of all the wild impulses."

The man looked up.

"Oh, for God's sake quit that grumbling. You knew what you were doing all right; maybe we *both* acted on impulse, but—"

He saw Jake Hand for the first time.

"Who the devil are you?"

"Heh-heh-heh!" chuckled the old man.

The woman gave a little, terrified scream, then clapping her hand to her mouth stood still, her breast heaving, cheeks suddenly flushed, eyes startled.

Apparently Jake did not notice her.

"Jake Hand, folks, an' mighty glad to meet yuh. Here I was buzzin' along in my cactus-eater and you comin' tearin' along in your gasoline snorter—an' here we are, all nice an' sociable in th' middle o' th' ole Mojave. Folks, howdy!"

The man paid no attention to Jake's attempt at sociability. After a quick scrutiny he had feverishly resumed his work.

"Here," he snapped, "take hold here and help with this tire. There's five dollars in it for you. I'm in a hurry."

The tone was such as one might use to a menial were one very impatient and overbearing.

Jake flushed.

"Sorry, pardner, but to-day ain't my workin' day. All day t'day. Yuh see I was walkin' right 'long this here very highway last September when one o' these here speed maniacs hit me in th' back and busted my back bone. Yep. Busted her wide open. She ain't healed none too good since and th' doc don't let me work none. Just open air in th' desert an' complete rest, that's my prescription."

The woman looked quickly into Jake's face. The honest blue eyes beamed upon her, peering forth serene and comforting from the bronzed features.

The man grunted and resumed his work.

"See anything of Bob?" he asked and there was a note of anxiety in his tone.

The woman shook her head.

"There isn't a thing in sight."

Feverishly the man worked at the tire.

The silence grew embarrassing to the woman. Jake made no sign of moving on, nor did he seem anxious to say anything; his china-blue eyes kept scanning the faces of the two people.

Finally he cleared his throat.

"Y' know yuh reminded me o' two Bonita birds when I seen yuh gettin' outa that air ottymobile."

He paused expectantly. There was no comment.

"Yep," he continued. "Jes' like a coupla Spanish Bonita birds. Y'know they don't sit on eggs th' way most birds do. They put one leg on th' egg t' hold it steady, an' th' warm desert air does th' rest. Yuh see there's lots o' wind in this here desert, an' th' Bonita birds have to hold their egg steady t' keep her from blowin' away. If they set on th' egg th' way most birds do it'd make it too hot. Sorta hard boil it. It gets that hot on th' desert."

Jake paused, looking into the eyes of his hearers with a look of cherubic innocence.

The man tugged and pulled at the metal rim, already becoming hot in the intense rays of the sun. The woman, shifting her attention in sheer weariness, looked into Jake's honest eyes.

"How did we remind you of those birds?" she asked.

Jake's eyes glinted with enthusiasm.

"Yes'm, yuh see it's this way. Th' Bonita birds standin' weeks at a time on one foot, th' other holdin' th' egg, an' bracin' themselves against th' desert wind, get one foot shorter'n th' other. Then when they fly they fly purty fast.

"Well, when they come t' light they can't run along th' sand th' way most birds do—on account o' that short leg. So they have to jes' plow into th' sand in order t' stop. That wears off th' feathers from their breasts an' makes 'em bald chested. Yuh can tell 'em anywheres 'count o' them white chests; an' when I seen you people gettin' outa that car, an' seen your bald chests right away I thinks o' them Bonita birds."

Once again the woman shot a swift, indignant look at the old miner. His blue eyes—serious, calm, serene in the tranquillity of the desert—without a flicker of humor or the quiver of an eyelash looked into her face.

If it could be said there was any expression in those wide, blue orbs, it was one of reproach. Much as an angel might look at some mere mortal who had presumed to doubt divine guidance.

The woman took a deep breath, knitted her brow slightly, and slowly studied the miner from head to foot.

"Go on and get in the car, Edith." The voice was like an order, at the same time it carried studied insult to the old miner.

The woman flushed.

"I'm quite comfortable here, thank you."

Jake studied her face for a minute.

"How old's Marjorie?" he inquired, much as one might casually seek to make

conversation with a guest whose little girl was present.

Had a bombshell exploded under the car the couple could not have been more thunderstruck.

The man jumped upright, his eyes blazing. The woman looked in wide-eyed wonder. It was plain they had forgotten her comment about leaving Marjorie, or else had not thought the prospector near at the time.

"Look here, you damned desert rat," thundered the man, "who do you think you're talking to and about whom?"

The expression on Jake's face was a study—wide-eyed innocence, mingled with a little hopeless wonder; then he chuckled:

"Heh-heh-heh! I forgot you folks didn't know. I was askin' about th' woman's little girl o' course; but I plumb forgot you folks didn't know I was a Sikik—that is a Siekick or whatever it is you call us. Yes, sir, I surprise folks lots. Bein' out here in the' clear desert th' way I am I gets purty close to nature. Get so I can see things I do. Jes' knowed the girl's name was Marjorie. Sometimes I forget to tell folks about bein' a Sikik."

There was a pause. The man seemed to be on the verge of assaulting Jake with the big wrench he held in his hand. The woman's hand had gone to her breast. She was watching Jake with a queer look of choked emotion.

Jake apparently did not notice the belligerent attitude of the man.

"Sometimes I can see inter th' future," he ventured a little timidly, much as a shy bird would hop forward making discreet advances.

The man tapped his forehead and resumed his work. The woman still stood, hand on her breast, wide-eyed.

Jake reached into the machine and pulled out a robe. A gentle, sweet sympathy seemed to radiate from his open eyes, his candid countenance.

"Come over in th' shade o' this here Joshuay tree, ma'am, an' I'll see if I can see inter th' past an' future if yer interested."

"Get into the car, Edith," commanded the man.

Edith flushed at the tone.

"On the contrary, George, I think I shall rest in the shade of this giant cactus. You may call when you are ready."

The man sprang to his feet and took a step toward Jake. The old prospector seemed absolutely oblivious to anything except the woman. However, his watery, blue eyes squinted down the road.

"Is that there a dust cloud down yonder?" he asked.

The effect upon the man was electrical. He jumped back to the tire and resumed work with feverish intensity. The woman looked down the road, long and carefully, then once more she shot a quick, appraising glance at the old prospector.

"Did you do that on purpose?" she demanded, and there was just a faint hint of humor in her tone.

Jake's gaze was as calmly indifferent as ever, his eyes as wide and candid.

"B'gosh, I guess there wan't no dust, after all!" he said.

Settled on the robe under the shade of the Joshua tree, such as it was, the woman looked up expectantly.

"Well?" she asked.

Jake whistled to Aristotle, who came slowly plodding over to the tree where he stood, legs apart, head drooping, long ears sagging forward. Jake stooped and picked up a handful of sand. Spreading his red bandanna neckerchief on the ground, he deposited the sand upon it, and then gently agitated the grains by manipulation of the corners of the cloth. The woman watched eagerly.

"How old's th' girl?" Jake repeated.

"Eleven," answered the woman shortly.

Jake settled back on his haunches, apparently forgetting the neckerchief before him. His clear, blue eyes clouded somewhat, as though darkened with pain.

"Now, ain't that funny?" he mused. "It was just when I was that old that my mother run away an' left me. Ain't it queer? She ran off with a man one night, an' I never seen her since—'cept once."

He paused. Something suspiciously like moisture glinted in one corner of his eye.

"T'wan't her fault, ma'am. Don't think that," he added hastily.

"Yuh see, dad neglected her. He was all wrapped up in business an' money makin'. But then he didn't realize he was neglectin' her—not till afterward. She ran off with one o' these here dance sharps—'lounge lizards,' we call 'em nowadays.

"Dad never got over it. Y' see, he loved her jus' like I did. When she left th' sun jest went right outa my life. Dad didn't last long—got ter drinkin'. As fer me—well, ma'am, yer can see fer yerself. I'm honest, but I ain't made no great success—jes' kinda an ole desert rat, prospectin' a bit. Sometimes I get one or two meals a day, an' sometimes I don't. Oh, well, I ain't got much longer."

Tears—frank tears—were coursing down the woman's cheeks.

"You — saw — her—once—after that?" she sobbed?"

Jake's voice grew low and solemn.

"Jest afore she died, ma'am. Shot in a saloon brawl over Tonapah way. Yuh see, he left her inside a month. They always do—"

The raucous blast of the automobile horn announced the man's impatient summons. The car was ready to proceed.

The woman looked up into Jake's eyes, a beseeching look.

"Oh, why did I do it? I don't really care for him—just a wild impulse—swept off my feet before I knew it—that and the liquor in the punch at the dance last night. Oh, dear!"

Jake walked toward the machine with firm, quick steps, dropping temporarily the desert shuffle. The woman sat sobbing beneath the Joshua tree.

"She ain't goin', pard," Jake informed the man.

The other rasped a quick oath.

"Look here, you damn desert rat, I've had about enough of your—"

He broke off. The sun had somehow glinted swiftly on cold metal. The blued steel of a heavy revolver bored into his stomach. The blue eyes of the old prospector were no whit softer than the metallic blue of the revolver.

"On your way, stranger, an' make it snappy. Out here in th' desert we *do* things. Git goin', an' git goin' hard, an' don't look back, an' don't come back. On yore way!"

The man hesitated—looked at the heavy weapon—looked back down the highway—laughed a mean, nasty laugh, and, with a sneering, obscene comment, jumped in the car.

Jake stood in the roadway until the car was but a speck in the distance. Then he rejoined the woman.

"Yore husband comin'?"

The woman nodded.

"I think so. We only left Los Angeles a few hours ago, and I left a note telling him I was headed for Reno." The voice choked. "I thought somehow that if he cared he'd come—and—if he didn't care—then I didn't."

The old miner nodded slowly.

"Now you jest lay down an' get a little sleep. Only remember never tell him anythin' except you got too much o' that there punch an' that yuh don't remember nothin' more. Will yuh promise me to tell him that—jest that, an' nothin' else?"

The woman hung her head. "Would it be right to—lie?"

"Why, sure, ma'am. Take me, fer instance. I'm known from one end o' th' Mojave to th' other as th' most honest man in the cactus, but I wouldn't hesitate t' lie jest a little bit so's ter make a feller understand somethin' he wouldn't understand. That ain't no lie. That's doin' him a favor. An' then there's—Marjorie—"

The woman raised her handkerchief to her eyes.

"I'll do it. I promise."

Jake smiled, a slow smile that started with his old, china-blue eyes, and wreathed gradually over his tanned, leathery old face.

"That's th' way, ma'am. Now jes' yuh lie down there an' get a little sleep. Things will come out all right. Leave it t' ole Jake."

Having seen that she was as comfortable as possible, the prospector whistled to his burro and began a slow progress down the highway for a hundred yards. There he stopped until he saw the black form of an automobile tearing along the road.

Jake crept along, leading Aristotle, walk-

ing in the same direction as the automobile was coming, seemingly oblivious of the fact that he was on a traveled highway. He kept well to the center of the road.

After several fruitless blasts of the horn the machine skidded to a stop. An angry voice behind demanded that he get out of the way.

Jake turned in surprise, apparently noticing the man for the first time. This man also was in evening clothes.

"Waal, can yuh beat that?" exclaimed Jake, smiling his slow smile of guileless innocence. "I didn't know you was anywheres around. That's sure one on me."

"All right," yelled the newcomer. "Get out of the way. The sand's too deep on the sides—I can't get around; get your damn mule off the road."

Jake's voice conveyed reproach.

"That ain't no mule; that's a burro. Aristotle. Don't be in sech a hurry, stranger; get down an' sit awhile. Say, what's th' idee? Everybody on this road seems to be wearin' a funny kind o' uniform. What's the big idee?"

The stranger's face lighted with quick interest. He hopped from the machine.

"How far ahead of me are they?" he demanded.

Jake mused. "Waal, th' man must be about half an hour th' start on ye, but th' woman ain't."

The man looked startled. "What do you mean."

Jake took his time about replying. "Yuh know, stranger, 'tain't none o' my business, but I jest happened t' see th' finish o' that party.

"Seems like th' feller thought her husband had been neglectin' her an' that there was a chance fer him. Seems he drugged her wine or somethin' like that, an' she just come to when they got right along in here. Say, man, but she did light inter him when she found out she'd been drugged an' kidnaped.

"She was still groggy, too. Didn't know jes' what she was doin', but she sure sent that guy on his way quick."

The man listened, his face flushed, eyes staring round with wonder and excitement.

"Where is she?"

Jake apparently did not hear the query; he dropped to his haunches and prepared to "visit."

"Funny, stranger, but I used ter be a mighty important sort of a feller myself. Business always business—that was me—an' believe me, pardner, I made th' dough. Yes, sir, I stacked it up—but my wife—I didn't know she felt I was neglectin' her. Women are funny thataway. She left me cold—an' now look at me.

"Yuh know a man don't amount ter so much without a good woman. Money—hell! What's money? Man! I never knew what a home was until I lost it.

"Waal, let's see, I'm gettin' off th' subject a bit, ain't I? Yuh see, I was poundin' along th' road, jes' like yuh seen me jes' now. There ain't much travel along here, an' my ears ain't so good when I get to day dreamin', so here I was shufflin' 'long—"

The man interrupted, and there was something savage in his voice.

"Say, you—I don't want to hear your life's story. Tell me what happened and where is my wife? Quick! Time's valuable—I've got to get started."

Jake paid no attention to the interruption. His eyes were fixed meditatively on the eastern horizon and he rambled on without change of tone or position.

"Waal, this feller had t' stop, 'count o' me an' th' burro. I guess he was good an' mad, an' I took my time 'bout gittin' outa th' road. I see there was a woman 'sleep in th' back seat, an' she woke up when th' machine stopped.

"She looked all round fer a minute, sorta dazed like, then she lets out a yell. 'Bob! Where's Bob?' Th' man tells her t' shut up. Says he's drugged her punch an' taken her with him—that Bob don't love her no more, an' that she's goin' ter live with him."

Jake paused and fastened his deep, blue eyes on the other's face. Slowly a look of doubt that had crept into the man's eyes faded and he listened with eager interest.

"Yes, pardner, that there man seemed to have jes' nacherly kidnaped that woman. Waal, yuh'd oughta seen her git outa that machine, auto robe an' all! 'Yuh can't git

out here on th' desert,' says th' man. 'Yuh'll starve t' death.' She says she'll starve t' death a hundred times over rather than stay with him—an' out she goes.

"Appar'ntly both of 'em had forgotten 'bout me; but when he starts ter foller her I unlooses th' ole gat an' makes him back up an' drive off. She staggers over under a Joshuay, flops down on top o' th' robe, an' goes ter sleep agin. I see there ain't nothin' fer me ter do, so I mooches along. An' here we be, stranger.

"Yuh ain't an' officer, are yuh? Maybe some detective sent after her?"

The man shook his head. There were tears in his eyes.

"Where is she?"

"Right over there—under that Joshuay. Yuh can see that black hump—over there t' th' right—that's it. Why, say, stranger—yuh must be Bob!"

The man did not reply. He was running with the strange, shuffling steps of one who attempts to sprint through deep sand. As he approached the Joshua tree the woman rose and threw herself into his arms with a glad cry.

Jake whistled to Aristotle, and once more resumed his plodding way over the yellow sand of the desert, turning back on his original course to the north, at right angles to the highway. Soon he was merely a speck shuffling along through the cacti, his burro walking slowly behind.

The figures under the Joshua tree separated and looked out over the desert. A small rise of ground hid the prospector. The man shook his head and laughed.

"Just a crazy old desert rat, sweetheart. You wouldn't remember him because of the dope, but I wanted to thank him for the information. However, it doesn't make any difference."

Jake looked back over his shoulder. The figures were lost to sight behind the little hill, but the empty automobile loomed large upon the highway.

"Ain't women jest plain hell?" he inquired of the patient burro. "Yuh never can figure 'em. Thank the Lord I ain't never had no truck with 'em. I been an orphan as long as I can remember, an' I always been a bachelor. Giddy ap, Aristotle!"

THE END

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PHOEBE

PHOEBE, singing in the rain
When the other birds are still,
While the gray reluctant dawn
Creeps across the hill,
What a futile thing to chirp
Everlastingly the same
Silly thin reiteration
Of your name!
But what sweet and sudden song
Rises in a liquid rush?
Phoebe's patient monotone
Has aroused the thrush.
Nest by nest and tree by tree
Wakes to melody again,
And the morning's full of birds
Singing in the rain.

Amelia Josephine Burr.

Her Hour of Reckoning

By ELIZABETH YORK MILLER

Author of "Bondage," "Mrs. Marbury's Alibi," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PARTS I AND II

EVE, wife of Neil Kingslake, prosperous London merchant, is slowly but inexorably being overtaken by her past. No one in the community, and, least of all, her husband, suspects the existence of Sara, a girl child. Eve Kingslake has schooled herself to forget that tragedy of her youth, staged in the mystic Desert of Sahara, but now a secret message comes from Aylmar Brinton, Viscount Grayling, who is the father of Sara. He tells her the child has grown into a self-willed beauty and is about to throw herself away on unscrupulous Raymond Lacosta. Eve later finds the viscount apparently slain by foul means. She flees, and consults Jim Howland, cousin and secretary of Grayling, who advises silence. Mrs. Kingslake, in the guise of family friend, meets Sara, who has come from France to England, pursued by Lacosta. The girl intuitively surmises that the woman is her mother—and Eve confesses the truth to her reproachful child. Lacosta craftily inveigles the unsuspecting Kingslake into blackmailing Grayling, who has reappeared mysteriously. Mr. and Mrs. Kingslake go to Tunis, where the viscount and Sara are visiting. Eve sees an inescapable doom at hand.

CHAPTER XVII.

POOR LITTLE WIDOW!

WHEN traveling Neil had none of that exclusiveness which afflicts a certain type of voyager. He enjoyed mixing with his fellow men and it was no part of his plan that Eve and he should have their meals in the luxurious suite. She, however, would have preferred it, although not from snobbishness. What she wanted more than anything just now was to retire from the world.

But now she had ceased to oppose Neil or anything he wished to do, and such was her submission to fate it did not surprise

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for November 28.

her greatly, when they went down to dinner that night, to find the woman in black at their table. Minus her coquettish white-coiffed and crape-hung bonnet and clad in black lace with a string of what passed for enormous black pearls clasped around her throat, she was revealed as even younger than Eve had thought. Her hair was pale yellow, short and curly, and she had a baby-eyed face the infantile innocence of which was a little belied by a lavish application of make-up.

In Eve's quickly formed opinion this pretty little lady was a type not altogether unknown to the traveling public, the more or less respectable adventuress seeking fresh pastures. Eve's opinion, however, was based mainly upon personal prejudice, first because of the incident of the telegram, and then because Neil's appreciative but not too discerning eye had found something here to admire. Eve knew that he continued to admire the obvious beauty and she commented angrily to herself that she didn't think much of his taste.

There were only the three of them at their table and although Eve was silent, purposefully so, the strain got too much for kind-hearted Neil. He felt that his wife was being unnecessarily oblivious to their companion and making her ill at ease, so he passed the salt to the demure lady in black and observed that they appeared to be having a comfortable crossing.

She replied yes, and that she was thankful, for the last time she had crossed the sea had been too terrible for words, and she was by no means a good sailor.

Eve secretly wished that a gale would spring up. The very demureness of this woman frightened her. Eve knew her own sex pretty well and she thoroughly understood that shy, modest manner which can take in almost any man on earth. She was obliged, finally, for her own pride's sake to join in the conversation which Neil had begun and cheerfully continued.

"I suppose you have friends in Tunis," hazarded the over-amiable Neil.

"I am not sure," said the little lady. "Some people I know were there, but they may have left by this time. Still, one is sure to meet friends in this part of the world at this time of year. And I like getting to know new people, too. Everyone is always charming to me.

"I don't know why, exactly, but I always seem to make friends wherever I go and since—since I've been left alone in the world, I'm so restless. I keep moving about all the time."

Neil sent her a sympathetic look in return for her smile and confidence, but what Eve sent her would have hurt her feelings had she been aware of it. Apparently, however, she was not aware of Eve's thinly veiled hostility; apparently Eve was one of those potential and charming friends she was always finding.

After dinner Eve was dragged to the smoking room where they had coffee, the pretty lady accompanying them at Neil's urgent invitation, and smoking innumerable cigarettes which to Eve's disgust she drowned one by one in the dregs of her coffee cup.

Here, indeed, was a sharp antidote for the pain of other things. Only one pain can be suffered at a time, and Eve's vivid imagination pictured to her what might possibly happen if Neil cast her out of his life. Some other woman might step into it and help to ease his great hurt.

And Neil was such a stupid creature about women. He could never see through them and always chose to admire just the wrong sort, always a woman who to Eve seemed perfectly impossible. An understanding of her own sex did not mean that Eve fully understood herself, otherwise she would have realized that any other woman admired of Neil to the point where he showed anything but critical indulgence, would from his wife's point of view be regarded as a possible menace to their happiness.

They quarreled that night, and it had been a long, long time since they had quarreled with any seriousness.

It seemed to Neil that Eve was determined out of sheer malice to spoil this holiday to which he had looked forward so blithely. She had begun to spoil it even before it was thought of, and in his mind he went back to the night when she was

lost in the fog and turned up so late at Aunt Kitty's. That was when Eve had changed.

Ever since then she had given him trouble and anxiety and utterly destroyed his peace of mind. She was a well-beloved wife and she ought to be happy. He had always been told that one way to make a woman happy is to remind her constantly that she is dear and desirable, and he knew that he had not failed in that respect.

Here, indeed, was a miserable worm—his name for himself at the moment—preparing to turn or at least to squirm a little. For the life of him he couldn't see what he had done or overdone in the matter of being polite to the pretty young widow.

"Hang it, old darling, I had to make up something for your rudeness," he said irritably.

"I can't see that it was necessary to speak to her at all," Eve replied, her voice sharp and rasping. "And it certainly wasn't necessary to invite her to join us after dinner. I wanted to come back here and be alone with you. What was the idea of going to the expense of this suite if we're to spend all our time in the filthy smoking room?"

"I think—" said Neil, now in his really obstinate mood—"that I'll go back to the 'filthy' smoking-room and have a cigar before I turn in."

"Yes, do—do! But if you decide to promenade the deck afterward with somebody who may accidentally trip across your path, please make it the lower deck."

"Eve!"

"Don't speak to me!"

"Eve, darling. Aren't we getting just a little beyond ourselves?"

She did not speak and he said: "I know you won't mind my having the cigar here. I have never purposely hurt you in the whole of our life together, and now I'm going to tell you something which you may not believe, but which is true.

"I have never hurt you in the whole of my life—there's never been anything, even before we met, which it could hurt you to know all about. Not many men can say a thing like that, and some men wouldn't be particularly proud of it. But I am. I'm rather 'stuck-up' about it.

"Our love, our perfect life, has meant everything to me. It has grown from such a solid foundation. But you must remember that after all, I'm human. I've got nerves as well as you, and lately you've been playing on them like the devil.

"I've taken to imagining things—wondering if you're hiding something from me. The truth is, you've always kept some secret place in your soul from me—"

"Yes, go on! What do you think I've hidden, then?" she demanded. It was a hysterical challenge which he did not know how to meet. He had appealed to her from his very heart and she had responded with a challenge.

"Oh, it doesn't matter. Forget it," he said. His manner implied cynical indifference.

"I am going to bed," Eve announced. "And I'd rather you didn't smoke in here, if you don't mind. It will do you good to get a breath of air, and for heaven's sake don't imagine that I'm jealous of a painted lady masquerading in widow's weeds."

"Just as you like," Neil replied stiffly, and to her anguished surprise he took her at her word.

The trouble with Eve burdened Neil's heart. There must be some reason for her extraordinary conduct of late. Every puzzling thing in this world has its logical explanation, if one could only find it. Nothing happens without a reason. What could have happened to turn Eve from a cheerful, loving and, he would have said, a contented wife into the morbidly miserable woman she was now?

He went onto the deck and leaned moodily against the boat's rail, puffing discontentedly at a cigar which did not burn as well as its famed brand guaranteed. That might be his fault, or the fault of the sea air. It tasted hot but flavorless on his tongue and the lighted end was bursting into that species of bloom which every well-conducted Havana has been trained to avoid.

Lots of people were still about. It was a night too enchanting for early bed; the

Mediterranean heaved gently under a silvery moon and the air blowing from Africa was sweetly warm.

Poor Neil with his burden of depression felt that melancholy sense of loneliness which nature's appealing moods always inflict upon the solitary traveler, and for the first time in his life he felt that he was solitary. He wanted to share the beauty of this night with Eve, and Eve was sulking and had scarcely been civil to him since he had announced their destination to her.

In the old days—already he was beginning to think of them as "old days"—she would have been by his side, her elbow close to his on the rail. She would have been exclaiming softly at the loveliness of it all, entreating him to notice how the moon turned the sails of that queer ship in the distance to pure silver and made it look exactly like the little metal brigs one discovered now and again in the antique shops. Eve was a noticing, appreciative woman, and Neil had learned to see the world through her eyes.

At this moment he was missing her badly. He thought he would go back and beg her to come out with him; but remembering how disagreeable she had been, and probably would continue to be, he resisted the impulse.

He was not to remain alone, however. As Eve in her jealousy had prophesied, the pretty widow turned up. Suddenly she was there beside him, her fluffy curls blowing in the wind, a white fur coat protecting her against chill.

"Isn't that just too wonderful!" she exclaimed. "Do you see that ship? Doesn't it look exactly like—"

And before she had begun that last sentence, Neil knew what she would say about the queer ship with the silvered sails.

It was pleasant to have some one to relieve his loneliness. Neil would have welcomed a word from the deck steward and developed it into a little chat, but this was even better and more comforting. He flung away his bursting cigar with a feeling of relief. It wasn't often that a cigar lost control of itself with him and took the liberty of burning badly.

"Have a cigarette," said the friendly young woman, offering him her case.

He accepted her invitation and she took one herself, both being lit by Neil from one match, the pretty lady touching his little finger with hers in course of the ceremony, an affectation which he had always condemned as bad manners, but which on this occasion did not seriously offend him. Then they sat down in a couple of deserted deck chairs, drawn snugly together in a protected angle.

It wasn't long before Neil's companion began to give him an interesting account of her life. Although English, herself, she told him that she was the widow of a French officer who had been killed in the last stages of the war. Eve might have picked a flaw in that statement on the score that young widows even in France where mourning is adhered to more affectionately than in most other countries, would scarcely be wearing crape so long. Still, it might have been true.

She told Neil that her married life had not been very happy, and that her girlhood had been marred by a great tragedy. She was a Mme. Marchand, her Christian name being rather hideous—Rebecca, in fact—but everybody called her Becky.

Oh, yes, she knew the country they were going to very well; knew it all the way from Algiers to Tunis or the other way about. For two years her husband's regiment had been stationed at Bou Saada which, in her opinion, was one of civilization's jumping-off places, interesting no doubt from the tourists' point of view, but a deadly spot to endure for two years.

Neil, entertained by the cheerful babbling voice, pricked up interest.

"How long ago was it you were there?" he asked.

"About three years ago," she replied pensively.

He was slightly amused, but did not draw attention to the discrepancy in her tale. If her husband had been killed in the war it was strange that she should have been living with him in Bou Saada only three years ago.

Neil began to understand now what Eve had meant by describing their table com-

panion as an adventuress. He felt adventurous himself, sitting out here in the moonlight with such a dubious if charming young woman, but at the same time he felt a little uneasy.

His annoyance with Eve was subsiding, and this sort of thing wasn't playing the game with Eve. Besides, the other passengers had all disappeared and the deck steward, who had been stacking up the chairs, hovered about waiting for them to go, too.

"Well, I suppose I'd better turn in," he said, as she began to look for her cigarette case again.

"Perhaps it would be a good idea," the young woman agreed. "Your wife will be wondering where you are, won't she?"

There was just a touch of malice in the charming voice and it ruffled Neil.

"My wife is asleep by this time," he said. "Oh, by the way, Mme. Marchand—when you were at Bou Saada you must have met an acquaintance of mine. He was there about three or four years ago, a Captain Lacosta."

The name had a surprising effect on little Becky. She gave a start and turned sidewise, staring blankly at Neil, her red lips parted in what might have been taken for an expression of dismay.

"Who did you say?" she demanded.

"Lacosta—Captain Raymond Lacosta."

She shook her head slowly. "No, I'm sure I haven't met any one of that name at Bou Saada. You're certain it *was* Bou Saada?"

"Fairly certain," Neil replied indifferently, "but I may be mistaken. Good night, Mme. Marchand. I've enjoyed our talk."

"Good night," she repeated.

When he had gone she sat on for awhile, heedless of the deck steward's obvious anxiety to shut up shop for the night, and lit still another cigarette. There was an expression in her eyes which suggested that she was thoroughly out of patience with herself.

As for Neil, he went back to his temporarily deserted wife with something new to think about. Either the pretty lady or Raymond Lacosta had lied to him, but for what purpose he did not know. It came to his slow brain finally that the liar was probably the pretty lady, who most likely had some little escapade of her own to shield.

Well, Eve should have no further cause for complaint against him on the score of over-amiability to charming ladies traveling alone. He would be as reserved as she could wish with Mme. Becky Marchand to-morrow.

Nevertheless, although forced to accept Eve's opinion of their table companion, Neil had no desire to be cross-questioned to-night on the subject of what he had been doing this last hour or so. He was pleased to observe that Eve appeared to be asleep or wanted him to think so, and he got into bed as quickly and quietly as possible.

Neil need not have worried himself about whether or not the pretty lady would give him away about their tête-à-tête. He put off mentioning it to Eve, since she did not question him as he fully expected her to do, and after putting it off there seemed no particular reason why he should drag it into their conversation later. That would make it look as if he had something to confess and he was a little bored by being treated continually like an erring schoolboy.

Eve spent the morning in the sitting room of the suite de luxe writing postcards and letters, and Neil kept her company with an entrancing little volume he had discovered, called "Behind Tunisian Walls."

He felt that he was about to enter a new world and the excitement and mystery of it absorbed him. All very well for people to talk about it being "hackneyed," to say that "everybody goes to Tunis nowadays," and to belittle the thrill that he insisted upon having. It was as much a new experience for him as for a child being taken for the first time to the seaside.

He would have his thrill, despite Eve. He was dogged about it. She could do her best to spoil things, she could have a rotten time if that was what she wanted, but he was going to enjoy himself.

All the same, occasionally his attention came out from behind the Tunisian walls and took a furtive peep at her. She was dashed busy with her writing.

"It looks as though you'd just finished your autobiography," he said.

Eve turned and nodded over her shoulder with a faint smile.

He returned her smile and retired again behind the walls of Tunisia.

She was more like herself this morning—her old self. Perhaps she'd discovered that it wasn't worth while keeping up that manner of an actress of melodrama. Eve needn't create drama for his benefit. The world was too full of that sort of thing already.

When the luncheon gong sounded she slipped her correspondence into her bag and turned to him with an inquiring air. "Are you ready?" she asked.

He was quite ready though somewhat apprehensive. It was a pity that he hadn't said something casual about seeing Mme. Marchand last night and learning her name, at least. She was a catty little person and might read something significant in the fact of his silence.

It was humiliating to think that even a stranger might imagine he was afraid of his wife. He didn't know that every good man who loves the woman he is married to, has moments of being terrified of her.

They went down to lunch and although the sea was still beautifully calm, Mme. Marchand did not put in an appearance.

Eve commented upon it briefly and with a suspicion of scorn. "Your friend must be ill," she said.

"Looks like it," Neil agreed, ignoring the tactless phrasing of his wife's remark. "She said she was a bad sailor."

Apparently the pretty lady was still indisposed at dinner time, for she continued to be absent, nor had they seen her anywhere about the deck during the afternoon.

Eve dismissed her from her mind a little regretfully. She had been an antidote for pain—such a small antidote for such a great big pain. That quarrel of last night had brought Eve back to the point where for awhile she had been nearly normal.

Not that Neil and she made a habit of quarreling, but this particular jar had reduced them to the ordinary basis of life whereon they stood as husband and wife, bound to protest and find fault if anything threatened in the nature of transgression to the feelings. It wasn't usual for either of them to transgress, but when either of them did or appeared to do so, the other could be counted upon to bring down the roof.

That had been one of their great joys in each other, that overwhelming love which defended itself and could never, never be beaten. Anything might happen to Neil and Eve, but each knew that their love had an immortal quality.

Neil, whose commonplaceness ran hand in hand with aspirations toward a higher level, had once been attracted by a framed verse in a picture dealer's window and bought it, brought it home and then—after thinking the matter over—tucked it away in a drawer. It had taken his eye at a time when he was in money difficulties, and he wasn't at all certain that it hadn't done a little something toward helping him face that crisis.

The verse ran:

> It's easy enough to be happy
> When life goes by like a song;
> But the man worth while is the man who
> can smile
> When everything goes dead wrong.

Eve had been very tender with him about that little framed verse; she hadn't encouraged him to put it away; but he felt that she regarded it as a poetical atrocity and he was ashamed of himself for having borrowed strength from it.

As the little S. S. General Beaucourt moved slowly up the long canal to Tunis at daybreak the next morning Neil would have been greatly astonished to know that Eve was repeating that verse under her breath, and wondering if she had it in her heart ever to smile again.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WOMAN AND THE SOUL.

SARA BRINTON was having a morning in the bazaars.

Lord Grayling had bribed this willful child of his as one bribes savages. He had discovered that it was possible to deal with

Sara to a certain extent by that dubious method. She wouldn't do everything for money, but she would do a great deal.

Also, she had her own private reason for seeming to give in to him on the matter of Raymond Lacosta. She was in secret correspondence with Lacosta, now, and he had counseled her to be a little patient over this affair, as his wife was divorcing him. To Sara, of course, this meant that eventually he would marry her.

Sara was enjoying herself very much in Tunis. Some chord had been struck which fascinated her. Grayling had given her a two-seater car and a beautiful Arab horse; she had the full run of the dressmakers and her pockets were filled with money as fast as she cared to empty them.

But her greatest joy of all was in the bazaars. She would have lived there if she could and her arrival with Hadji, the beautiful Arab boy who was her slave for a stipulated wage, and Mr. Canabre, the Tunisian commission agent, was the signal for great rejoicing.

Grayling wouldn't let her go alone with Hadji, even though he suspected stout Mr. Canabre of conniving with the merchants to raise their prices for her benefit. Certainly the more they charged the bigger were the agent's commissions, so it was scarcely possible that he could put much heart into his bargaining.

Sometimes Jim Howland made one of the party, but Jim was sick of the bazaars, and Sara's delight in them filled him with disgust. It seemed to him that her worst qualities were brought out when she was hobnobbing with the sly oily merchants who treated her with a freedom and familiarity they would have been slain for showing toward a woman of their own race.

That particular morning Sara set off a little earlier than usual, for a tourist ship was due to arrive and later on the place would be flooded with its several hundred passengers. Sara hated Europeans in the bazaars. They were an offense to her. It was bad enough to have Mr. Canabre always at her elbow, for by now she felt quite qualified to take care of herself in the labyrinthine passages.

They drove to the gates of the old town in order to save time, and thereafter proceeded to waste it liberally. Sara loved this slouching around, this prowling and dawdling with which the ceremony of Oriental shopping must needs be conducted.

First they went to the silk shop of Ben Hassan who was favored by Sara because he served the ladies of the Bey's household and dealt only in the most expensive stuffs. Here Hadji settled himself for a comfortable morning's chat on the doorstep with a pal, and the Tunisian agent got out his account book preparatory to checking Ben Hassan's figures, which were not always accurate.

Sara in the seat of honor on a canopied divan, was provided with coffee and cigarettes. She began proceedings by flinging off her hat and running her fingers through her fuzzy red-brown mop.

This morning she had something in mind to do which had infuriated Jim Howland when she told him about it. He had remonstrated with her to no purpose, and then had tried to induce Grayling to stop her, but that didn't work, either.

"What's the harm if it amuses her?" Grayling said with a laugh. "Anything to keep her out of mischief."

"I call it letting her get into mischief," Jim replied. "It's encouraging her. The more you give in to the child, Aylmar, the more trouble you'll have later on."

Sara watched this altercation with dancing eyes. She loved teasing Jim Howland and she loved being spoiled by her father. Of course, she would give him more trouble later on—she had told him so, and he knew what to expect. There was something savage in the way she took delight in teasing.

"Daddy says I can, so I don't see what it's got to do with you, Jim Howland. You'll never see the room, unless you beg most prettily to be shown it," she said.

"Thank you, I don't want to see the beastly thing," Jim replied.

After all, Grayling's attitude was the more sensible. It was nothing dreadful that she wanted to do; it was merely tasteless, the whim of an undeveloped girl's mind to have her bedroom done up in imitation of one she had seen in the show palace of the Bey.

The style, one had to admit, was scarcely

suited to the ugly Victorian mansion in Eaton Square, but as Grayling pointed out with all fairness, it was Sara's room and the sight of it need offend no one but herself and the unfortunate housemaid who would have to keep it clean.

"All that gimcrack trumpery!" Howland exclaimed. "Half of it isn't even silk. Are you going to buy one of those bedspreads stuck all over with bits of looking-glass?"

"No, my beloved," Sara had replied pertly. "I'm going to get one that's all silver and silk embroidery. I've seen one I *think* I'll get, only I'm waiting for Hassan to come down another couple of hundred francs. He drops fifty every time I see him. I do wish you'd come along, darling Jim, and give your advice. You've got such wonderful taste, haven't you?"

"You've had my advice," Jim replied.

It was incredible how much this girl could torture him without doing anything special to warrant such a feeling of hurt. Her lovely wild little face was a torture to him, whether she laughed with the mockery of seven devils or wept like a remorseful saint.

This morning in the bazaars she was fulfilling her threat to buy hangings and rugs for the room which was to be a copy of that of the late Bey's favorite wife, and Ben Hassan, lying like the most proficient of troopers, assured her that the treasures he brought out for her benefit had indeed come from the palace of a personage whose name he daren't mention, and might only be sold on the strict understanding that they were never displayed or used in Tunisia.

The lady to whom they had belonged had been murdered, and her relatives had some scheme of revenge up their sleeves which might include an innocent merchant were it known that he had trafficked with her assassins.

To all this the astute Mr. Canabre listened with unmoved boredom, waiting patiently to take down the figures as they were arrived at, and Hadji, squatting on the doorstep, carried on an animated conversation with his friend from the Street of the Fez-Makers.

There was no hurry. Sara wondered what it was like to be murdered; and bland, handsome Ben Hassan of the dark eyes and gleaming smile, obliged her by telling her all about this particular affair.

It had been painless, he told her. The lady, who unfortunately deserved all she got, had been "sent into the desert."

"Then she died of hunger and thirst," said the callous little Sara. "That isn't my idea of a painless death, thank you!"

At this point the Tunisian man of business gave Ben Hassan a sharp glance and said something in Arabic.

Hassan shrugged his shoulders. "I am sorry, *mademoiselle.* When a woman dies, what you would call her soul is sometimes sent into the desert. It is a saying we have —a way of putting it. But, of course, no woman has a soul.

"Now, *mademoiselle,* I will show you. This carpet took ten years in the making and twenty beautiful girls worked on it. You will see there are twenty distinct patterns. Those girls were chosen for the work by an old princess of Tunisia, and she had a reason for the making of this carpet—a most romantic reason.

"She wished to find a faithful wife for her son who had been cruelly betrayed, and she took a vow that however long—"

"Excuse me for interrupting you, Ben Hassan, but I want to ask you something," Sara said abruptly.

"Certainly, *mademoiselle.*"

"It's this: you remarked a moment ago that of course no woman has a soul. Do you mean to say that you honestly believe that *I* haven't got a soul?"

Attacked by such an unexpected question the merchant gave himself respite from the blow by passing it on to a neglectful shop assistant who had failed to observe that Sara's coffee cup was empty. When this was over and the lack of hospitality atoned for, he turned with a soft smile to his young customer.

"I'm afraid I don't understand, *mademoiselle.* The souls of women cannot be discussed—"

"Because they haven't got any," Sara filled in. "That's good—that's mighty good! What an insult! I've half a mind to walk out of this place and never come into it again."

"*Mademoiselle!*"

The pain in Ben Hassan's voice was acute, and poor Mr. Canabre's plump face took on an expression of sheer panic.

"Well, you tell me that you *know* I've got just as much of a soul as you have, and I'll *think* it over whether or not I buy any more of your silly trash. Half of it isn't silk, anyway—" She broke off with a little gasp of astonishment to find herself actually quoting Jim Howland.

"*Mademoiselle*, please!" Ben Hassan began again, in what one only can call accents low and trembling. "You are European and I, myself, have been to Paris. I am very much a man of the world.

"I know you have a soul, *mademoiselle*. European gentlemen tell me that their women have souls—some of them—and I understand that it must be so. I really do understand how they think and believe—everything except just one little thing which is of no consequence at all.

"I understand that it is not immodesty which allows European ladies not to veil themselves, but just the custom. Whatever is the custom is all right, and in your country it is the custom for ladies to have souls. You are in every way the equal of the gentlemen, and perhaps some ladies are more than equal. But—"

Sara darted a mischievous glance at the distressed Mr. Canabre.

"Well, Ben Hassan, you've apologized enough. Tell me what that one little thing is you don't understand. I won't be angry."

"*Mademoiselle* is too kind!" murmured Hassan. "Is it true that I may ask you that one small question and that you won't be angry?"

"No. I promise not to be angry. I'm dying to hear," said Sara.

"I've asked English gentlemen, and always they laugh and laugh, as though I have made a joke," said Hassan sadly.

"I'll—I'll do my best not to laugh," Sara assured him, veiling her dancing eyes.

"Well, *mademoiselle*, it is this. I have tried and tried, but I cannot understand how a man who respects himself and his religion—even a Frenchman or an Englishman—how he can bring himself to sit at table with a woman, to share a meal with her, even though she is his wife."

And then Sara Brinton did what other people to whom Ben Hassan had presented that problem had done. She laughed until her dancing eyes were dim.

The Tunisian commission agent laughed too, but with a little snort at the end of it, as though to say: "What did you expect!"

Sara kept her word to Ben Hassan. In any case, she was too much amused to be angry, and she could see, although his interest in her was based sordidly on money, that she had both hurt and failed him. He had expected more from her than the laughter she had said she would try to suppress.

It was the same old thing all over again. Nobody would tell him how any self-respecting man of whatever nationality could allow a woman, however much he loved her, to sit at table with him. It must be a secret of the Christian countries—a jealously guarded secret that even an Arab who had been to Paris and was a thorough man of the world had no hope of penetrating unless he made it his life's work. Perhaps, Ben Hassan thought, he would die with that question in his heart.

Allah, of course, knew the answer; there was nothing unknown to Allah. That comforted him, and he brightened up considerably when Sara said she would have the carpet which had taken twenty girls ten years to weave at the behest of the old princess in search of a faithful wife for her son.

Sara was very critical of his silk stuffs, however. It was impossible to palm off on her any more inferior selections. It was a sad thing, but she appeared suddenly to begin doubting his word and trusting more in her own thumb and forefinger. That burst of laughter had stripped Ben Hassan of some of his glamour. It had happened before, and he resolved that never again would he ask the question which invariably aroused laughter and never brought an answer.

But there was a question that the young lady had asked, and he hadn't answered properly, although he hadn't been so rude as to laugh at her. Leave rudeness to foreigners!

Even his friend and patron, the com-

mission agent, had been annoyed with him for the way he had replied, and Ben Hassan had a very high regard indeed for the favorable opinion of Canabre, who also had been abroad and farther afield than Paris even. He had been three years in London in a rug importing house, and might have remained there except for homesickness.

Having concluded that morning's business with the house of Hassan, Sara dragged her little retinue along to the stuffy, odorous kiosk of the perfumier to the ladies of the Bey's household.

He was a huge man with a fierce black beard and eyes like a fawn's, sitting behind the little arched window of his booth and completely filling it; a man clad wondrously with a jeweled turban and raiment of pale blue embroidered in silver gilt.

The kiosk itself was like the inside of a silk wadded workbasket and heavy with scent. Rows and rows of crystal bottles decorated with gold traceries filled the narrow showcases on the walls, and there were two divans facing each other like the seats in a railway carriage, for the convenience of customers. Indeed, the whole shop was scarcely bigger than a compartment in a railway carriage.

Sara, of course, was already on good terms with this merchant. Before she had finished patronizing him it was probably that each and all of her late school companions would have received a most unsuitable and expensive bottle of attar of roses or some other powerful scent.

The ceremony here was grave and dignified, something of a ritual. From behind the latticed frame of his window the dispenser of perfumes produced various bottles, the stoppers of which he anointed from the contents; and Sara solemnly held out her handkerchief to be dabbed, and then as solemnly sniffed it.

Everything smelled pretty much the same, except the sandalwood, which was overwhelming and finally caused the more delicate flower odors to swoon. Sara fairly reeked of sandalwood when, her purchases completed, she sallied forth once more into the dim vaulted arches of the market.

There now fell upon her a mood which Mr. Canabre dreaded. She didn't want to buy anything more, for although she possessed all the greed of a spoiled child, there were times when she could be surfeited, and this was one of them. She wanted just to wander about a little dreamily, peering into such profitless places as the Street of the Fez Makers and that devoted to the great Tunisian industry of slipper making.

All those dim, squatting forms, heads bent, fingers working ceaselessly; little children who looked to be no older than five or six, toiling as industriously as their elders. Sara had never seen an Arab child at play, or even in possession of a toy. She had never seen any children's toys for sale in the bazaars. One could give these toyless children brief pleasure by bestowing sweets or money—particularly money—but such bestowal only stimulated them to clamor for more.

They never thanked for what was given them—only shrieked and whined for more. Mr. Canabre had been very stern with Sara on the subject of alms, and now she never threw pennies or sweetmeats to the children unless a quick retreat was possible.

She wondered why one couldn't be decently generous to the poor little beggars without having that kind impulse mercilessly abused. Then it suddenly flashed upon her that she herself possessed qualities akin to those of the little Arabs. She herself was greedy and ungrateful.

Perhaps Ben Hassan's statement that of course no woman possessed a soul had stirred up Sara Brinton to look into the matter for herself. Some people said that dogs have souls, and without studying the idea very deeply Sara was inclined to agree with them.

"I've got a soul!" she exclaimed under her breath, with just the suspicion of a sob.

A date merchant in a soiled burnoose, with his wares spread frankly on the dirty cobbled passage, gave her a sour, disparaging look. She was not likely to buy of him, and consequently he was under no necessity to be hypocritical. He didn't like her, and he didn't in the least mind letting her know it.

"If *mademoiselle* has finished for to-day—" Mr. Canabre suggested gently.

"I've finished my shopping, if that's what you mean," Sara replied. She turned a very cold eye upon him. He was paid by the hour in addition to the handsome commissions which came his way.

Yes, in this country one paid and paid, and never got gratitude—merely impatience. They were all tarred with the same brush. And once again Sara Brinton began to wonder if she, too, was tarred with the brush of ingratitude.

"I must let daddy know that I'm thankful for all he's done for me," she thought. "And I must be nicer to Jim." Then a little quiver went over her. "I won't give up Raymond—*I won't!* That's one thing nobody can make me do."

Rebuked and thoroughly bored, Mr. Canabre resigned himself to this profitless dawdling which would certainly lose him the chance of capturing the pick of the tourist ship, when Sara suddenly gladdened his heart by announcing that she was prepared to go back to the hotel.

She was bored herself. How it happened she did not know, but her beloved bazaars had become uninteresting. Her father had promised that he would take her to the desert as soon as she wanted to go, and she thought now that she might want to go quite soon.

She had probed the shoddy, shallow depths of the bazaars, and there was nothing in them worth keeping. Jim Howland was right.

They began to thread their way back out of the maze of crooked passages, Canabre leading and Hadji bringing up the rear with a bundle of merchandise on his head. At a corner where a little street led from one of the passages, Sara stopped as though mind, the power of thought or of physical movement had completely deserted her for the moment.

Canabre and Hadji waited stolidly. It was the street of the Ouled Nails, and to both of them that monotonous drumming was sordidly familiar.

Hadji set his bundle on the ground to ease his head. *Mademoiselle* might elect to listen to the negro's drum for Heaven knows how long. Of course she didn't know what it meant, but Hadji didn't particularly care whether she knew or not. He didn't think about her knowledge or lack of knowledge.

He was too used to that sound to be moved by it in the very least. But Sara had never heard it before. This was the first time that her wanderings in the market place had brought her to the street of the Ouled Nails. Canabre had always chaperoned her carefully, but to-day she had got out of hand and he could only follow.

To his unspeakable relief, she finally exclaimed:

"Oh, I don't like that! Quick—quick—let's get away!"

He was only too glad to take Sara at her word.

Already the vanguard of the tourist ship was invading the bazaars, but it might not be too late to catch a profitable patron.

CHAPTER XIX.

CUPBOARD LOVE.

AS Sara was making her way back from the bazaars, eccentric Lord Grayling had just returned from a little expedition of his own. In these days he was forever haunting the museum in Carthage and generally he went alone. He came into their private sitting room at the hotel wearing that elated, ecstatic expression which to matter-of-fact Jim Howland seemed pure fanaticism, and proclaimed that he believed he was on the trail of a great discovery. It had to do with the reason why the religion of the ancient Carthaginians compelled them to sacrifice their first-born.

Flinging off his soft felt hat and running his hands through his hair with a wild and characteristic gesture, he was about to expatiate upon this gruesome subject when his cousin interrupted him.

"One moment, Aylmar. I think you've forgotten about that telegram I showed you. The General Beaucourt gets in to-morrow morning, and those Kingslakes will be here. Have you said anything to Sara yet?"

Grayling, checked in the midst of his enthusiasm on another subject, shook his head.

"You think of everything," he said despondently. "Did I show you the letter I had from Lacosta?"

"Good heavens, no! Where is it? What did he have to say? Really, Aylmar, how they can trust you with important affairs of state I don't know. You promised to tell me everything that happened in connection with this beastly affair."

Grayling tugged gently at his beard, and the keen, penetrating eyes became wistfully pensive.

"It is true—I am not to be trusted with anything," he said sadly. "But I only had the letter this morning. Or was it yesterday? I tore the thing up."

He stepped out upon the wide balcony which overlooked the street, and Jim Howland followed him in a spirit of acute uneasiness.

A great procession stretched along the street as far as the eye could reach. On they came, carriage after carriage, each crammed full of sightseers from the big tourist ship which had anchored in the bay that morning.

Grayling eyed them with interest. He seemed as fascinated by the sight as a child might have been.

"By Jove, Jim, I admire the pluck of those people! At least they were determined to see the world, but I should imagine that mostly they saw only each other. Hitting the high places, I suppose. Won't Sara rage if they swarm into the bazaars before she's ready to leave!"

Jim Howland jogged his elbow.

"We were just talking about Sara," he reminded him. "And you were telling me that you had received a letter from Lacosta which you've torn up. Do you remember what was in it?"

Grayling laughed shamefacedly and, taking out his handkerchief, gave his forehead a furious mop.

"There's no getting away from you, Jim. You're a regular leech for sticking to disagreeable subjects. Of course I remember. I'm not such a fool as I seem. Although I *am* a bit of a fool. To be quite frank with you, I've made up my mind to let myself be blackmailed to the tune of one hundred thousand pounds."

Jim's square chin became peculiarly set and bulldoggish.

"You won't," he said. "Not so long as I'm alive. What's the fellow's game, Aylmar? How on earth has he 'got' you? Through Mrs. Kingslake?"

"Exactly."

"Oh, she's in with him, then? My God, I can scarcely believe that."

"And I don't believe it at all," Grayling replied. He was still shamefaced, but fairly cheerful. "What the damned scoundrel wrote me was that his wife had brought an action for divorce against him, and that he will soon be in a position to accept Sara's hand.

"He knows how greatly that will please me, and he's arranged for a certain Kingslake to see me in the matter of transferring a lump of Brinton Line stock either to him or to be settled upon Sara. The inference, I take it, is that if I make him a present of that modest fortune he'll leave Sara alone, but if I settle it upon her he'll persuade her to marry him—so either way, he'll get hold of it. And if I refuse to do either, he'll inform Kingslake who Sara's mother is, which, I have good reason to believe, would completely wreck Mrs. Kingslake's life."

"So you're going to give in for the sake of this woman who may be deceiving you! Her husband may be in it, too," Jim Howland said, his disgust nearly overwhelming him.

"I certainly shall. There isn't enough money in the world to recompense Mrs. Kingslake for the suffering I brought upon her. And it was entirely my fault. She had no chance against me and the forces I brought to bear upon her. If money will do anything for her, then she's welcome to all I have.

"There's only one thing—I mean to see Kingslake before I make up my mind as to what I think of him. Although it does not matter in the least what I do think. He will get the money if he wants it—or whatever share Lacosta has apportioned him. Ring for some cocktails, Jim. I feel the need of one."

Jim did as requested, and when he came back he found his cousin apparently absorbed again in the monotonous spectacle of the sightseeing procession.

"There seems no end to it," Grayling muttered. "I wonder if there was a beginning? That's like the stream of human life, Jim—all seeing this beautiful world—with neither beginning nor end. And what do they see really, except the others? They miss such a lot of this beautiful world by being so occupied with their human relationships.

"That's why I've always liked the desert. There's space, there's room to breathe and think in. A man can grow in the desert—in fact, he can't help it. And for all the unhappiness it has brought to me and to the only woman I've ever really cared for, I know that the Arabs are right when they call Sahara 'God's Garden.'"

Jim Howland made an impatient gesture. "Aylmar—how are you going to account for Sara? That is, if this Kingslake man knows nothing of her—her relation by marriage to him? I should imagine, however, that he knows right enough."

"Possibly, but I doubt it," Grayling said with a sigh. "But do I need to account for her? In the event of his not knowing, is it necessary for me to define her parentage? I've no desire to hurt the man for the mere fun of the thing, and it would give me no satisfaction to hurt Mrs. Kingslake. The reverse, as I've told you."

Jim did not know how he was to cope with his cousin. There was a mischievous quality in Grayling, not slyness, but more to be described as perverse willfulness. Very likely he knew exactly how he meant to meet this situation, but by teasing Jim Howland into an anxious temper he might get additional light on the subject.

The cocktails arrived and were both consumed by Grayling. Jim's brain was clear and he meant it to remain so.

"I don't think you realize," he said earnestly, "that if this Kingslake man sees Sara, he can scarcely fail to know that she is Mrs. Kingslake's daughter."

"Good heavens, Jim—Sara's not a bit like Eve! She's my daughter."

The brown beard quivered with indignation. Here was an inverted species of jealousy! Jim Howland recognized and dealt with it softly. He was a very sane and practical young man.

"That's the trouble. Sara's unmistakably your daughter, but I'm afraid you've overlooked her hair and eyes. I have seen eyes the color of real jade only once, except in the case of Sara and Mrs. Kingslake. I once saw a baby in a perambulator with eyes that color—the infant daughter of a college friend. But they weren't flecked with yellow.

"And both Mrs. Kingslake's and Sara's are more flecked in the left than in the right eye. It's really noticeable. Also, the color of their hair. If you wrapped a braid of Mrs. Kingslake's hair around Sara's head, it would appear to be Sara's own."

"You appear to have studied the matter," Grayling remarked absently. "You are probably right. Have you anything to suggest at all? Because I don't despise your advice, Jim. It's solid and it's friendly—two admirable qualities in advice if one is foolish enough to ask for it."

"There is just one thing I might advise." Jim replied. "It may sound absurd. I do hate seeming absurd."

"But, my dear Jim, we're all absurd! The best thing to do with dignity is to lose it. Then if you slip on a banana peel you may be physically hurt, but at least you can summon a faint smile to join the chorus of mirth your mishap has aroused."

Jim muttered something uncomplimentary under his breath. Those two irresponsibles, Aylmar and Sara! Neither of them would ever look a fact in the face if it could be avoided, and that meant that Jim Howland had to take their burdens on his shoulders.

"The absurdity I was about to suggest is this," he said. "Would it be possible for you and Mrs. Kingslake to convince her husband that Sara is her neice?"

Grayling laughed and was about to make some frivolous reply, when Jim held up a hand, restraining him. "Wait a moment. Think it over, Aylmar. You've told me the story, remember. You met her when

she was touring with a small party in Algeria.

"Well, suppose she had a sister who was also of that party? Suppose it was the sister you fell in love with and treated so badly? You were not in a position to marry her, but it happened that she died, anyway. Easy enough to have her die when Sara was born, and natural enough that she should make Mrs. Kingslake promise to keep her secret.

"All this, of course, is going on assumption that Mrs. Kingslake isn't in the scheme to rob you. It would stop the blackmail at once."

Grayling looked thoughtful, then he said. "You forget that Sara knows and she's infatuated with Lacosta. She makes no secret of what she means to do eventually. We can't trust Sara to stick to such a fairy tale."

"You can trust her if she gives you her word," Jim said quietly.

"But how can I make her do that?" Grayling asked.

"Appeal to her better nature," Jim replied.

His cousin laughed sadly. "My dear Jim! Since I've had the imp living with me I'm inclined to agree with her Mother Superior. The girl is all out for herself. Sometimes I doubt if she even loves me as much as she pretends.

"It's cupboard love, Jim. If I hadn't a penny in the world we should soon see how much her fondness amounted to. Don't think because I give Sara everything she wants that I'm blind to the little wench's selfishness."

From behind them in the doorway came the sound of a startled, gasping sob, and both men turned to find Sara standing there, her clenched hands pressed to her cheeks, her eyes staring wildly.

CHAPTER XX.

EYE-WITNESSES.

"OH, there you are!" Grayling exclaimed, without a trace of the embarrassment he might have been expected to feel. "What's the matter?"

Sara dropped her hands to her sides, but kept them clenched.

"I h-heard what you were saying—you and Jim," she replied, with that sob still in her voice. "T-talking about me like *that!*"

"Well, you shouldn't eavesdrop," Grayling said good-humoredly. "Isn't it about lunch time? I find I've got an appetite."

Sara stamped her foot and because Jim Howland frowned at her she returned him a heavy scowl.

"I don't care what Jim thinks about me," she declared, forgetting the noble resolution she had just made to be kinder to Jim. "He's the last person in the world I'd let worry me.

"But daddy, I *do* care what you think. I know I'm horrid and selfish and everything you said, but it's true that I'm fond of you, and it's also true what that self-righteous beast, Jim Howland, said.

"If I gave you my word of honor about anything I'd keep it, even if I haven't got a better nature to appeal to. What was it you wanted me to do?"

"Help us lie to shield your mother," Grayling replied in his curiously offhand way.

"But—how does she need shielding?" Sara asked with unconcealed bitterness. "She's got everything she wants, hasn't she? And she never wanted me."

"I think she did," Grayling replied. "She's in great danger, now, of having her whole life wrecked and Jim and I have been planning how to save her. That scoundrel you imagine you're in love with is blackmailing her."

Sara's head went back and she glared defiantly.

"I've told you and told you and *told* you that I will not have Raymond abused. He is not a scoundrel. Is it a crime to fall in love? And now I'll tell you something else-his wife is going to set him free, so we can be honorably married."

"So he wrote me." Grayling remarked with dry emphasis. "And he also wrote me that he expects me to settle a hundred thousand pounds either on you or on him in order to further that happy event and make housekeeping easy for you."

"Oh, I don't believe it—oh, no!" Sara cried. "Show me his letter."

Jim threw his cousin a look which said: "Now you see what an idiot you were!"

"I tore it up," Grayling replied meekly.

Sara regarded him steadily for a brief moment, then a rather hard expression came into her eyes.

"Forgive me, daddy, but a little while ago you said some cruel things about me which I wasn't meant to hear. Now I'll tell you some things I want you to hear. I know you intend to leave nothing undone to prevent my marrying Raymond, and so when you say you've had such a dreadful letter from him, but tore it up, I—I can't quite believe you. I'd want to hear Raymond say those dreadful things himself, before I could believe it."

"Well, you may have the opportunity," Grayling replied airily. He did not seem in the least ruffled by the young woman's impertinence, but Howland felt that she deserved a good shaking, and since it couldn't very well be done physically, he decided to give her a mental jolt.

"What your father says happens to be true," Jim told her sternly, "and as far as I can see it amounts to this, that you've sunk so low that you've put yourself on a level with a man whose intention it is to blackmail your father out of a hundred thousand pounds because he knows that your father will do everything possible to shield your mother. It amounts to this, that you'll go hand in hand with that man to menace your mother's good name before the world."

As upon a former occasion, Sara flew at him like a young tigress and he had to defend himself against those angry little claws by catching her wrists and holding her while she still did her best to beat at him.

"You lie, Jim Howland! I don't owe my mother anything, but I wouldn't do a thing like that. You lie—lie! I'll kill you if you ever say such a thing to me again. I'll get a knife and drive it straight into your black heart."

"Now how on earth do you know the color of Jim's heart!" Grayling exclaimed pensively. "I should have said that it was probably a healthy red."

"Oh, daddy—oh, *daddy!*"

And then, perhaps to Sara's surprise, Jim Howland's arms went around her and he was kissing her tear-stained face.

"Yes, dear, I must have a black heart if I've misjudged you so cruelly, and I'm glad you called me a liar. I'm glad you haven't got it in you to be such a traitor. Thank you—thank you—thank you!" And each "thank you" he punctuated with a tender, remorseful kiss.

Grayling got up, yawned and stretched himself, and then strolled casually out of the room.

As the door closed behind him, Sara threw back her head and stared up at Jim in amazement, her eyes still flooded with the tears of anger.

"Jim—I believe—I believe such a curious thing. You kissed me just now—different from the way you used to kiss me when I was a little girl—"

"You're still a little girl—a very little girl," he reminded her. "And sometimes you're a naughty one."

"Oh, I'm not naughty—I'm just wicked," she protested breathlessly. "You know I am, Jim—but I'm not a little girl any more. And the way you kissed me—I believe you're in love with me, Jim."

He winced. It was horrible to know that Sara recognized the kisses of love through her experience with another man. It was cruel that at her age she should have had such experience. He released her from his embrace. It was safe enough to do it, since her anger was spent, and dangerous for him to hold her there against his breast.

"It's no news to me to be told that I love you," he said, with an attempt to emulate Grayling's airy, frivolous manner. On Jim Howland, however, that manner did not sit easily. It made him seem a little pathetic.

"It is to me," said Sara. "Oh, Jim, I don't want to make you unhappy."

"Well, there's one way you can make me very happy, and that's by doing the decent thing—by playing the game on the side of your father until you're convinced one way or another whether he's right or wrong about Lacosta."

"I'll do that, Jim. I promise—word of honor—that I will." Sara said in a low voice. "Kiss me again, Jim."

"No—I think that'll be about all for to-day," he replied, still trying to keep up his airy manner. "You might imagine that you were falling in love with me, and that would be a sheer calamity. Besides, your father isn't the only one who wants his lunch. Lucky beggar, he's getting it!"

Sara looked disappointed. "I don't really believe you're in love with me at all," she said with a provocative glance from her mysterious eyes. "You are just making up to me to get me to promise—"

"And I succeeded. I have your word of honor, Sara."

"Under false pretences," she flashed back. "That is—I—oh, I don't know what I mean. Yes, for Heaven's sake, do let's go down to lunch."

The hotel was very gay that afternoon with the people from the big tourist ship crowding in for lunch. A great many of them, glad for the chance of sleeping ashore, had booked rooms for the night. They were being allowed two full days to give attention to Tunis and Carthage and other points of interest in the neighborhood.

The little ballroom was packed for the usual *thè dansant* and Professor Freddy, the incomparable little Belgian professional, as serious of face as he was light of foot, had his program filled before Sara could get hold of him, much to her annoyance.

She liked dancing with Freddy, not only because his dancing was perfection of style and rhythm, but because in the savage innocence of her heart it seemed more loyal to the absent Raymond.

It was a child's idea based on some notion that the convent had bred in her that with men in general a girl must be strictly impersonal. Professor Freddy was the most impersonal dancing instructor any girl could ever have encountered. His heart was in his job and he did not attempt flirtation nor even invite it.

This afternoon, having gone on the assumption that she could have as many dances with the professor as she pleased, Sara was disappointed and disgusted to find that the young—and some not so young—ladies of the tourist ship had not taken for granted that he would be at their disposal without a hard and fast business appointment.

He hurried up to her, bowing low, and voicing his own disappointment, although certainly he was not feeling as sulky as Sara was about it. *Mademoiselle* had not been in for the dancing for two afternoons and, of course, since she had made no appointment, he couldn't know that she would be in to-day. Otherwise he would have reserved his program subject to her wishes

Sara said, "Oh, it doesn't matter in the least. It's all right. My fault. I don't want to dance, anyway—I'm just sitting here. The floor's too crowded to be comfortable."

"Thank you, *mademoiselle*. It is, indeed, very crowded," Freddy replied. He then glided off to a middle-aged woman who, despite her inability to attack the "Blues" with anything but the motion of a tub rolling in a heavy sea, took a rollicking joy in that simple performance.

Sara was really cross with him, although she had been polite enough to restrain an open expression of her feelings. It was all on a par with her demand that life should give her exactly what she wanted at the moment she wanted it. What was life for, if not for that? Why shouldn't one have what one wanted?

Jim Howland, sitting beside her, watched her scowling, unhappy little face; noticed the pat of her foot on the floor in time to the inciting music. He felt amusement, a little pity, and the beating of a great, winged love which Sara had chosen to recognize, the recognition giving him a hope that he had scarcely dreamed before it might ever be fulfilled.

"Why not try me as a substitute for the faithless professor?" he said.

Sara turned and stared at him in astonishment. "Can you dance?" she demanded.

"You'll decide that after you've given me a try," Jim replied. "Perhaps I can't, up to your style—but I've been told I

don't dance too badly. At least, I promise not to trip you up."

"I always said you were a beast. Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because I didn't think it would have interested you. I don't dance anything like as well as the professor."

"I've never yet met a man who does," Sara said frankly. "But come on. We'll see. You won't be hurt if I stop at the end of the first round, will you?"

"My dear child, I'd be surprised and flattered if you went on," Jim replied.

Jim was over-modest about his dancing ability. It may be that he did not "trip the light fantastic" with all the proficiency of Professor Freddy, but the only fault Sara found in him was that he had not revealed himself before in the rôle of a partner.

"Why, Jim, you're a beautiful dancer," she cooed at him. "You steer so wonderfully."

"Well, you see I've driven a lot in London," he replied. "Steering beautifully has become second nature to me, and there are no traffic policemen here to cramp my style."

Sara giggled. "You ought to have told me. It was horrid of you."

"I didn't want to do the professor out of a job," he said. "I hope he isn't going to lose you on my account."

Sara began to hum under her breath:

"Je cherche apres Titine, Titine, Titine,
Je cherche apres Titine, et ne la trouve pas.
Ah, maman! Ah, papa!"

Everybody else was humming it, too, until the whole room become clamorous for the elusive Titine.

"I feel so happy, Jim. Why, do you suppose?" Sara said.

"Because you're a good girl, and good people are always happy," he replied.

"In what way am I good?"

"Well, you remember what you promised me, don't you?"

"Oh—*that!*" She pouted a little, then looked up at him with a sly expression. "You've got a funny code. I promised I'd tell a lie, and you say I'm being good. That isn't what they taught me at the convent."

"I don't think you'll have to lie. Leave that to your father. He's an old sinner, and a few lies more or less won't do him much further damage with the heavenly powers. All you have to do is not to know Mrs. Kingslake when you see her."

The hunt for Titine came to an end and they went back to their neglected teacups.

At the next table a party of three were sitting. They were old people, a man and two women. The man was close upon eighty, a tall, thin old man with a whimsical smile and an eager, sympathetic eye for the youth disporting itself on the ballroom floor.

One of the women was his wife and while the years hadn't done her too much damage, in her dress she affected the old-fashioned style of bonnet and bodice, and a little collar of thread lace fastened with a square pearl-framed brooch holding a lock of hair.

The other woman was of a more robust, vigorous type. She looked to be an alert sixty and was very much up to date, her crisp gray hair being shingled in defiance of a red, sun-baked face and a solid corpulency of figure. She wore a plain felt hat tilted over her eyes, one of which sported a monocle attached to a slender black ribbon, and her smart tailored suit was unbecomingly short in the skirt. She had prettily formed and well shod feet, but thick ankles.

Like the man, this woman was taking a great interest in the dancing floor, but a little discontentedly. Perhaps she would have liked to dance, herself, old and heavy as she was.

"I wish we were going to have a little more time here," the old-fashioned woman said plaintively. "I can't sight see properly until I'm rested up, and the ship isn't restful. We're just driven from one place to the other like a flock of sheep."

The old man laughed. "It beats me why anybody wants to sight-see. I'd like to go home for a change. What's the good of a family plot if you die on the other side of the earth?"

"I could have you cremated, George, and bring your ashes home," his wife suggested cheerfully.

The orchestra broke out at this point, and Sara dragged Jim Howland to his feet.

"Come on—come on!" she cried impatiently.

The monocled woman stared after them intently. "That's a pretty child," she said. "She reminds me of some one. I wish I could remember who. Not her features, exactly—"

The old man nodded. "I've been noticing her, too, and I know who she reminds you of—that charming girl secretary you once had, years ago. Eve something-or-other, her name was."

"Of *course!*" exclaimed the stout red-faced one. "That's who it is. The child isn't a bit like Eve, really, yet—"

All three were now craning to follow Sara's progress in the fox-trot, interested and eager. They talked over old times with great animation; "Do you remember—" this and that, and "I think I enjoyed most our camping in the desert.

"How beautiful Eve was! No, I can't recall her surname. Wasn't it curious that that weird young man became Lord Grayling? About the last thing one would have expected. I was rather worried, because we didn't know anything about him and I thought he was trying to make up to Eve."

The mention of Grayling's name had a curious effect upon the trio. They suddenly fell silent, each unknown to the others, speculating upon something which of course must be impossible. That girl with the hair and eyes of Eve had a neat swinging figure which vaguely reminded them of some one else.

The afternoon wore away and Sara discovered that it was the first time she had really enjoyed herself since they had been in Tunis. When the orchestra put its instruments into their swaddling clothes she made Jim come for a spin in her little car. They drove to Carthage and spent the hour of sunset on the seashore searching for ancient mosaics and broken pottery.

It was wonderfully still out there, a calming sort of stillness that helped to quiet the fever of restlessness which had taken possession of Sara in the bazaars that morning. She sat flat on the shore with her feet stretched out to within a few inches of the gently lapping waves. It seemed that she always had to be teasing something. In this case, it was her own feet—was she going to let the waves catch them, or was she not?

Then she told Jim about the drum in the street of the Ouled Nails, and how it had driven her in panic from the bazaars.

"An old negro with a crown of feathers on his head was beating it," she said. "It went on like this—tum—tum—tum—tum—just like a hammer on your brain, Jim. If ever I hear the thing again I shall let out a shriek. It was horrible! Oh, Jim, hold my hand—hold my hand! I'm frightened, just thinking of it. This is a savage country, Jim."

He held the little hand she flung at him with such a passionate plea for protection. There was a fine white line about his lips and he pressed that little hand too hard, for presently Sara squirmed and drew it away with the whimpering cry that he had hurt her.

The sun was down, now, and across the bay from them the lights of Tunis twinkled into life.

"Shall we go?" Jim suggested. "It's getting late and you know your father doesn't like waiting for his meals."

"Daddy's a greedy pig. Oh, yes—we'll go if you want to. I've been so happy this afternoon, and it isn't because I'm good, as you said. I'm not a bit good—and I don't believe good people are any happier than wicked ones, like me. It worries them so that everyone else isn't good."

Jim laughed uneasily. He knew where Sara obtained her flamboyant manner of speech, and to rebuke her would only make her worse. She was as irrepressible as her mad father.

"Come along, then," she added. "There's no poetry in your soul, Jim. I want to sit here all night and think about things—things that are worth thinking about—but your mind is on food. You

needn't make daddy the excuse. You're just bored with me—and hungry."

"Perhaps you're right," said Jim.

Dinner at the Majestic was from seven until nine, and it was a little after eight when Sara Brinton led in her men; a dazzling, lovely Sara in a frock of burned orange crêpe, heavily fringed, and her short frizzy hair combed the wrong way until literally it stood on end. She was, indeed, freakish.

Grayling never took any notice or made any remark about her ideas of expressing or emphasizing her personality, but to Jim Howland everything Sara did, every mood she showed meant something.

To-night she was elated. The fever had come back and in her giddy, light-headedness she parried Grayling's frivolous talk with the rapier-like precision of a thorough woman of the world. She was as clever as her father; she was piercing, witty, gayly mischievous.

Three old people at a near-by table stared covertly at them all through the meal, and discussed the thing in low tones.

"Surely that's Grayling. I've seen his photograph often enough in the picture papers, and he hasn't changed much. It must be getting on for twenty years ago, now."

"Not quite," said the authoress.

"Didn't you ever hear from Eve after she left you?" inquired the old-fashioned lady.

"No. In fact, I was annoyed with her. I didn't care to inquire. It was very wrong of her to go away as she did, giving practically no excuse. You may not remember—but I do— what a terrible job I had when we got back to Algiers, finding somebody to type my work. I only brought that girl along with us because I was working against time and had promised a travel book by a certain date. She cost me pounds and pounds—not to mention my peace of mind."

"Well, well," said the old-fashioned lady, "it's quite simple. She went off and married Mr. Brinton—I mean Lord Grayling. There's the proof of it before our eyes. She didn't like to tell you, because she knew you'd disapprove. I wonder what's become of her?"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE UNGUESSABLE GIRL.

THE little steamship, General Beaucourt, moved slowly up the long canal to Tunis at daybreak. The dawn had a peculiar rosiness, bright pink with a cloudy cast of pale blue in it. Behind the flat city the mountains reared majestically, some of them crowned with snow and catching the sun with dazzling brightness.

Neil and Eve Kingslake stood side by side on the forward deck watching the solemnly beautiful effect of that dawn. Inwardly, Neil was wildly excited. His dream holiday was being realized and somehow it seemed to him that he had never really lived before, but he was going to live now, and richly.

The approach to Africa stirred something in him which he had not known he possessed; a sense of romance in travel, a feeling that a great and wonderful experience was before him. No other country had ever affected him in that way. There was a strange spirit brooding over this land. It reached out to him and bade him welcome.

He wanted to speak to Eve about his fancy, but feared that she might laugh at him. Did she feel the same way? He glanced at her, then pressed her hand shyly, as a young lover. He felt that he was a very young lover, indeed; that they were boy and girl beginning the great courtship which was to grow stronger and stronger all down in the long years of life.

An exaltation flowed through his veins like potent wine. If, at that moment, he had come face to face with his reflection in a mirror he would have been genuinely astonished to see a stoutish, middle-aged man whose hair was deplorably thin.

But this curious feeling of youthfulness passed away to a certain extent during the bustle of departure and the bother of the customs. Then there was the hotel omnibus, for which they would appear to be the only passengers until, at the last moment, along came the pretty widow who had been

so mysteriously absent since the first night of the crossing.

She greeted the Kingslakes a little stiffly, as though she had no desire to pursue an acquaintance with them, and Eve—believing herself to blame—inquired sympathetically as to her health.

"Oh, no, I have not been ill," Mme. Marchand replied. "I preferred to remain in my cabin—that is all."

There was no mistaking her tone and manner, now. She meant to be rude and sat with her gaze determinedly directed toward the window.

Secretly, Neil wondered what he had done or said the night before last to offend her. Was it because he had gone in and left her on the deck alone? Possibly that was it, and she must be a woman who took offense easily. Well, he was sorry, but he couldn't drag in an apology at this date. It was altogether too trivial a matter to require explanations.

Poor Eve was busy with her own thoughts. Now that the perilous thing she had dreaded and fought to protect herself against was almost upon her, she felt quite calm. She imagined that people could go to the scaffold in that spirit, but she still had some vague hope that Jim Howland would find a way to come to her rescue.

It was very early when they reached the hotel and they went straight into the dining room where some of the people from the tourist ship, anxious to make the most of their second day ashore, were already assembled. A fairly substantial meal was ordered, since they had been up so long, and the conventional coffee and rolls scarcely seemed to meet the case. While it was being prepared Neil went off to see about their room and to register.

Eve sat at the little table listlessly looking over a several days' old newspaper when suddenly she was conscious of some one approaching her and glanced up to see an old friend.

"I don't believe I can be mistaken," the shingled gray-haired woman was saying. "Besides, I saw your husband and daughter at dinner last night. My dear child, you've scarcely changed a bit. You're Lady Grayling, now aren't you?

"Surely you remember me, Agnes Preston? And the Waverleys are here, too. Only for to-day, though. We're on a round-the-world tour. Poor Mr. Waverley's grown very old and grumbles a lot. May I sit down? Are you having breakfast alone?"

During this speech Eve had been murmuring, nodding, smiling—all a little mechanically. So it had been obvious to these people out of her past that Sara was her daughter. If so plain to them, then how much plainer it would be to Neil, and any moment now Neil would be back.

Eve's first impulse was to rush out of the dining room, but Mrs. Preston would require some leave-taking and the least delay might be fatal.

As soon as she could get a word in Eve said hurriedly: "Yes, do sit down. It's such a pleasant surprise to meet you again. But I am not Lady Grayling. I don't quite know what you mean, and my daughter is at school in England. My husband and I have only just arrived by the boat from Marseilles. My married name is Kingslake."

The authoress gave her a sharp look and Eve remembered with a shudder what a crafty woman she was, always seeing and knowing too much.

"It's none of my business, of course," Mrs. Preston said bluntly, "but now I understand something which puzzled me very much at the time. I understand why you left me as you did, and why Aylmar Brinton went away at the same time. Does your husband know?"

Eve bit her lip and shook her head.

"Then take the advice of an old woman of the world. Grayling is staying here with his daughter. Don't let your husband see that girl if you can prevent it. I'm glad I met you in time, because obviously you didn't know they were here."

"Mrs. Preston, I—I don't know what to do! Oh, what can I do!"

"There, my dear, just pull yourself together. Perhaps I can think of something."

The elder woman got up quickly and strode out of the room and Neil, meeting her at the door, stood aside politely for her to pass him.

A few moments later Agnes Preston was rapping loudly at the door of Grayling's sitting room and presently it was opened to her by the young man she had first observed dancing with Sara. Jim Howland, in a shabby dressing-gown, his bare feet thrust into a gaudy pair of Tunisian slippers, was naturally astonished and a little embarrassed to find a strange woman demanding entrance, and thought of course that she had made a mistake about the room she wanted.

But no, she hadn't made a mistake. She wished to see Lord Grayling, and her name was Mrs. Preston.

He had to let her come in, for Agnes Preston was one of those determined elderly women who, by dint of being disagreeable if necessary, generally succeed like "the Argentines, the Portuguese and the Greeks," in getting pretty well anything they want.

Feeling acutely the shabbiness of his old brown dressing gown and the nakedness of his ankles, Jim went through the little passage to his cousin's bedroom.

Grayling, always an early riser, was up and nearly dressed.

"Hello! Who was kicking up that infernal din just now?" he demanded cheerfully.

"A woman—a fat red-faced old dragon, name of Preston, who's come to pay you a morning call," Jim replied. "I suppose it's somebody who knows you. I noticed her at tea yesterday with some other people. I imagine they're from the tourist ship."

Grayling slipped into his coat. "Preston? Haven't a notion," he said vaguely. "What's she want?"

"I told you—she wants to see you. I had to let her in. In fact, she marched in without an invitation. Perhaps she's an autograph fiend."

"Well, march her out again. Tell her I'm suffering from the after effects of the champagne we had last night. As a matter of fact, I am."

"I'm not going to show myself to her again," Jim said sulkily.

"Don't know that I blame you. If you can't afford a new bath-robe, Jim, I'll gladly make you a present of one," Grayling replied. "You look like a young molting camel. All right, I'll see the lady. Really, if you'd like to know the truth, I feel rather flattered. It isn't often that a man of my age gets a call from a lady of whatever age before breakfast. I won't have you disparaging her appearance, Jim. I think you're probably jealous."

"She's got short hair and wears a monocle."

"That sounds distinguished," his cousin replied, giving his natty tie a final tug.

"Surely you remember me, Lord Grayling!"

The stout old lady was perhaps more distinguished in her eccentric appearance than by her pen.

Grayling said the usual thing: "Of course I remember your face quite well, but just for the moment I can't quite place you. Please forgive me. It's awfully kind of you look me up. Have you had breakfast? I'm just going to have mine on the balcony. Perhaps you'll join me."

To his consternation she said that she would, but a moment later when she had helped to place herself in his memory he was profuse with his apologies, and delighted to recall the pleasant little tour he had shared with her and the others so many years ago. And then, a few minutes after that, when they were sitting on the awninged balcony, he found himself minus his frivolity, giving close and serious attention to what she had to say.

It seemed that she found it difficult to forgive him for the abuse made of their hospitality during that tour of long ago, and impossible to forgive herself for letting it happen.

"That young girl was in my care, and I believe I saw what was coming," she said severely. "Poor, poor Eve! And she was so happy! Does the child know?"

Grayling hung his head. "Yes," he replied.

Agnes Preston leaned toward him and spoke earnestly.

"You must get her away. Surely you understand that. It's the only thing to do."

Grayling, himself, felt as helpless as any child. He couldn't very well explain the ramifications of the plot that had been devised against him.

"I don't know that she'd go. I scarcely dare trust her out of my sight, as it happens, and anyway, I've nobody to send with her." He gave his severe critic a wistful, pathetic glance.

"Oh, you *men!* Somebody's always got to be helping you out of trouble you make for yourselves—and that somebody is invariably a woman. I'll take charge of your daughter. I'll take her to Hammam Meskoutine, or anywhere else you like, since you say you're going to be detained in Tunis for a little while."

Grayling stared at her in astonishment. "But—but you're on your way around the world!"

"Well, I can cut that. I tell you, I'll never, never forgive myself for what happened to that poor girl."

Grayling nodded gloomily. "We had another plan, my cousin and I, and Sara has agreed to it."

But when he told Mrs. Preston the "dead sister story," she shook her head vigorously. It even moved her to mirth.

"My dear man, don't be so foolish as to try a thing like that. No man, unless he were half-witted, could possibly believe you. The only sensible thing is to send your daughter away, at once—to-day. We could motor to Hammam Meskoutine, stopping for the night at Bone. I believe the train journey is vile."

The trouble, of course, would be Sara.

And at this moment Sara was sitting up in bed devouring rolls spread lavishly with honey, and reading a long and impassioned love letter from her Raymond. He begged her, with sobs in every line, to be true to him and not to believe any heartless stories which might be concocted for the purpose of separating them forever. She was just to give him a chance. He was fed up with all the waiting and the separation they had endured; completely fed up with her father's attempts to vilify him, and was coming to Tunis by the next boat to have it out with Lord Grayling, man to man, face to face.

Sara devoured this lengthy epistle with as much greed as she consumed her honey-spread rolls. There was flattery in every word and a direct appeal to her senses. He said he kissed her little hands and her lovely eyes, and but for the accidental miscarriage of their plans she would have been his long before now, so that in effect she really was his.

Sara let the paper drop and thought about it. But suddenly she found herself thinking about Jim Howland and the way he had kissed her yesterday when he wrung the promise from her, and then refused to kiss her again when she asked him. She flushed scarlet at the memory. Why, she had been a traitor to Raymond! The idea hadn't occurred to her before. Jim and she were such old friends, and besides they were related, although distantly.

She wrinkled her forehead in an effort to decide just how distantly Jim and she were related. He was daddy's second or third cousin, wasn't he? Well, that wasn't close enough to excuse her being a traitor to Raymond. Should she have to confess that she had asked Jim to kiss her again? She made a little face, jumped out of bed, and began to dress.

As Grayling anticipated, Sara proved to be the trouble.

With her secret knowledge that Lacosta was coming over to Tunis by the next boat, nothing would budge her. She would stay in her room the whole week, if necessary, but she would not go to Hammam Meskoutine or even to Carthage with a strange old woman whom she detested at first sight. How could daddy suggest such a thing? And what had she ever done to be treated with such indignity? She completely cowed Grayling. When she flung herself into his arms and sobbed, he was a lost man.

CHAPTER XXII.

DRUMS OF THE DEVIL.

GRAYLING, whose irresponsible, faun-like nature had survived beyond his youth, groaned in spirit when the card of a Mr. Neil Kingslake was handed to him with the information that the said Mr. Kingslake was at Lord Grayling's disposal

for an interview whenever the latter had the inclination and the leisure.

Grayling was, unhappily, alone, and he felt the need of some support.

Sara's declaration that she would immure herself in her room was soon repented of, and to get rid of her for the day Jim Howland persuaded her to drive him to Carthage again, where he determined to keep her for lunch even if it necessitated doing damage to the car or employing bodily force.

The combination of receiving Lacosta's letter and the subsequent altercation with her father had driven Sara into one of her wickedly perverse moods. Grayling did not envy Jim's prospect for the day, but he did pity himself for being alone.

He had never seen this husband of Eve's, but he felt that he hated the man. A flame of jealousy shot over him, mingling with the natural indignation of one who is going to let himself be blackmailed.

There was nothing for it, however, but to see Kingslake, and a few moments later he was giving his caller a guarded welcome. Those shrewd, penetrating eyes appraised the very ordinary stockbroker with the round, good-natured face and the too, too solid figure, with a faint gleam of contempt.

"I understand that you have come from Mr. Lacosta," Grayling said. "It was frightfully good of you to give yourself so much trouble. Please sit down, Mr.—er—Kingslake."

Neil immediately felt awkward, and as he accepted the invitation to be seated he looked as he felt.

"Mr. Lacosta impressed upon me the fact that this transaction must be kept quite secret," he began nervously. "So I wish to assure you first of all that I have not so much as mentioned your name even to my wife. I have here"—he brought out some typewritten sheets of paper from his pocket and unfolded them—"I have here a list of the investments I should advise, and I think if you look them over you'll approve."

Grayling scowled and reached out for the papers, pretending an absorbed inspection of the various securities with their quoted figures. It all meant very little to him, really, as he was a rich man by accident of birth and not by personal achievement. The Brinton Steamship Line had been founded by his grandfather and held together by a fool-proof business organization which owed nothing to the brain of Grayling.

After a little while he looked up, as gloomy as he well could be.

"Well, there doesn't seem to be much for me to do but to arrange for the withdrawal of my own stock," he said with a deep sigh. "That can't be done all in a minute. The settlements are to be a little different from what I planned at first. I think I will settle the whole sum on Mr. Lacosta with a hard and fast condition—to which he will probably agree—that he does *not* marry my daughter."

Neil jumped as if he had been stung, and flushed scarlet.

"I thought there might be something like that," he said. "I've suspected it for several weeks. Lacosta is trying to blackmail you. That's what it amounts to, doesn't it?"

A wan smile flickered across Grayling's aquiline features.

"Trying! Why, man, he's succeeding! Do you think I'd make him a present of a hundred thousand pounds for sheer love? I'd rather see my daughter dead and in her coffin than married to that scoundrel. Besides, he isn't free to marry anybody. What's your share of the swag to be, Kingslake?"

Neil's face burned redder and redder, and his immediate reply was to take the lists he had drawn up and tear the sheets into shreds.

"My share is exactly nothing, sir," he announced stiffly. "I understood this was a straight business deal, and I never suspected it to be anything else until one evening I brought Lacosta home to dinner and my wife took a dislike to him. My wife is a woman of strong intuitions, which I don't profess to have.

"Her feeling about it woke me up to the possibility of there being something crooked in the transaction, and I meant to question you about it before I made any further move. Now I know how it is, I withdraw from the affair."

Grayling continued to eye Neil shrewdly.

"Lacosta hasn't hinted to you the nature of the hold he has over me, I suppose?"

"He hasn't claimed to have a hold over you. That's his cleverness. I thought I explained. For Heaven's sake, Lord Grayling, stand up to the fellow! Bring an action against him. I certainly shall. We'll fight the thing together. My reputation—"

"I'm thinking of my own reputation," Grayling interrupted. "I can't afford to risk it."

"You mean on account of your daughter's mother? He did say—"

Grayling turned deathly white.

"What did Lacosta say about Sara's mother? The unfortunate woman is dead—*dead!* She died years and years ago. I would have married her if I could, but my wife was alive at the time, and then—afterward—it was too late."

Neil made a gesture of pity.

"I'm sorry. The man lied to me about that. He spoke of Miss Brinton's mother as being a source of constant worry to you, and that you demanded all this secrecy on that account. I suppose you wouldn't care to confide in me a little? I might be able to help you. At least I'd have a good try."

Grayling laughed ironically.

"Lacosta has some knowledge of a folly I committed a good many years ago. He could blacken the name of a woman I love dearly—injure her in the eyes of her husband—lay waste her life. To protect her I will go to any lengths. I would beggar myself to protect her."

Neil studied the floor in deep embarrassment. Grayling's life must have been a succession of dubious episodes, judging from this confession.

"I suppose Lacosta has some letters," Neil hazarded. "The usual thing."

"It amounts to that," Grayling replied. "Anyway, he has the power to ruin her life."

"I think, if I were you, I'd put it up to that woman to tell her husband straight out all about it. If he cares for her, he'll be able to forgive her. You speak of this folly as having been committed years ago. It isn't going on still?"

"Heavens, no!" Grayling exclaimed. "The unfortunate woman doesn't care a pin for me. I'm not at all certain that she ever did. She's devoted to her husband."

Neil got up and paced the room restlessly, his hands clasped behind his back, his head lowered in thought.

"Of course you know," he said finally; "your reason ought to tell you that the matter won't be finished if you give in to Lacosta's demands. This is only the beginning. He'll bleed you white. You probably don't know the methods of these sharks—but you'll learn, and the experience will cost you everything you possess. For the sake of society the fellow ought to be shut up in prison. It won't make a bit of difference how much money you give him. He'll come back for more every time; and in the end you'll stand exactly where you are now, except that you'll be stripped to the world—utterly broken and ruined."

"My God, Kingslake—I wish you would not talk to me like this! You don't know what you're saying." Grayling clenched his hands, striking at the air as the full force and meaning of Neil's earnest advice shot him through and through.

What if he should turn to this man and blurt out the truth? Suppose he should say: "Sara's mother is alive; she's your wife!" Would Kingslake be able to achieve the noble forgiveness he assumed that a deeply injured husband could rise to?

"I apologize," Neil said. "Of course I have no right to advise you—but upon my soul it makes my blood boil to stand by and see you plucked. I'll have a few words with Lacosta before I'm done with him. He's got nothing on me—"

"Well, suppose he had?" Grayling put in. "Would you be so courageous in that case? You say that he has no hold on you, so it's quite easy for you to maintain your attitude. Our positions are not to be compared."

"No—that's true," Neil agreed. He felt crestfallen and ashamed. "I'll do anything you say—I'll even keep my hands off the fellow if it 'll be easier for you. You must be in a devil of a state of mind. I'm dashed sorry for you, and I'd be sorrier still if the crook managed to marry Miss Brin-

ton. I suppose she's completely infatuated with him."

"She appears to be," Grayling replied dejectedly. "There is one thing you can do for me if you will, and that is say nothing for a few days to any one about this talk we've had. I want to think it over a little longer. I may have to go on a journey."

He said the last with a vague, far-away expression, and Neil interpreted it as meaning that he meant, perhaps, to see the woman whom Lacosta was menacing and confer with her.

The discussion virtually ended there, and Neil left with very mixed feelings. He was disappointed, of course, and had reason to be worried over the financial setback, but he was also a little elated. Thank goodness he hadn't accepted Lacosta's check!

Left alone, Grayling went into his bedroom with indecisive, dragging steps, and unlocked a tin box where he kept certain papers and valuables. From it he took a small, slender bottle decorated with gold filigree and half filled with a greenish yellow liquid, oily in substance.

"I must go on a journey," he muttered. "I am tired—utterly exhausted."

He uncorked the little bottle and sniffed at it.

Somewhere—was it out in the street?—a drum beat monotonously, accompanied by a faint musical wailing.

And then Grayling did something which, if he had been in a state of mind to consider the effect, he would have known was fatal. He dashed the little bottle away with a passionate exclamation for his own weakness, and it was shattered to pieces against the steam radiator.

Instantly the room became filled with an overpowering odor like the pungent fragrance of the perfumery merchants' kiosk intensified a thousandfold, with something added that stupefied the senses. He tried to rush at the window to open it, but instead fell heavily face downward across the bed.

The drum beats and the piping grew louder now, and Grayling was no longer in a hotel room in Tunis, but out in the Sahara striding madly toward the blue sea of mirage.

Sara and Jim Howland were lunching on the covered terrace of Mlle. Rosa's restaurant in Carthage, surrounded by ruins in process of excavation, tangled gardens fragrant with roses and geraniums, ancient broken statues, columns and pottery, and provided with an incomparable view of the Bey's seaside palace with its long line of huts like a bathing establishment, and the glorious gulf looking across to Tunis.

They had just come from the cool greenish dimness of the old Roman reservoir with the wonderful arched vistas of colonnaded passages and the eighteen huge storage tanks, still in use after two thousand years.

Sara had been physically chilled by the age and immensity of those tanks. Her wicked mood had not been able to survive their solemnity and had changed to awed silence.

It was hot and sunny on Mlle. Rosa's terrace, but Sara shivered with the memory of the cold dimness of the reservoirs and the shimmering, faintly green light on the deep, still waters.

To Jim she never looked so beautiful as when her plaintive face was in repose. It was then that one could get a glimpse of that soul which Sara protested she owned.

Buxom Mlle. Rosa, whose tawny hair was almost as frizzy as Sara's, but not such a glorious color, bustled up with a tumblerful of hot black coffee for the pretty young lady who complained of chill, and gave it as her opinion that it was really dangerous to go into the reservoirs on such a hot day. One might take an illness from such an indiscretion.

Sara thanked her for the coffee and, leaning across to Jim, whispered solemnly: "She doesn't know why it made me cold. It isn't only my body. It just gave me a shiver inside. Jim, some parts of this earth are so very much older than other parts, aren't they? The very earth itself, I mean. Yet, God created it all at once, didn't He? I'm sure that Carthage is as old as time. Fancy one city being buried and forgotten, and then another city built on top of it and being buried and forgotten too! I won-

der if Paris and London will be like that some day!"

"Oh, cheer up, my dear," Jim said, with his matter-of-fact smile. "You don't have to swallow everything in one mouthful. Try the *hors d'œuvres* for a change. There's a good-looking young woman at a table behind you who's interested in that scarlet hat of yours. Her own is a widow's bonnet, but I can see something in her eyes which convinces me that she admires yours more and wonders how she would look in it. Oh, Sara, don't do *that*, my child!"

He ended in a horrified whisper, for Sara, with characteristic impulsiveness, had wheeled around in her chair to stare at the admirer of her hat. And then she jumped up with a cry of delighted recognition.

"Why, it's Becky—Becky Trail! Fancy seeing you here. I am Sara Brinton. Of course I was only a little girl when you left the convent, but you were always so kind to me. You and Emelie Lacosta. But come, sit at our table. This is my cousin, Jim Howland."

The pretty widow was shy in a delightful way and her demure eyes gave Jim a respectful consideration.

Sara forgot the chill she had caught in the old Roman reservoirs and chatted hard and fast, asking sympathetic questions about Becky's mourning, and learning that her old friend was now the Veuve Marchand and had lost her husband under rather tragic circumstances which she could not bring herself to discuss just at the moment.

"But Emelie Lacosta never knew what became of you, and she was dreadfully hurt because you didn't write. We never even knew you were married," Sara said.

The fair-haired little lady looked down and drew at the tablecloth with a slender forefinger.

"As a matter of fact, Emelie and I had words before I left school and somehow I never thought it worth while to make up the quarrel," she said. She flashed her painted smile at Jim and added, "Aren't schoolgirls silly, Mr. Howland?"

"I've never known one of them to admit such a thing," Jim replied.

"Well, of course, I'm not exactly a schoolgirl, now," said Becky with a meek sigh. Then she brightened up and turned to Sara. "Tell me all about yourself, darling. Are you still such an imp as you used to be? I remember how you'd tease Raymond Lacosta when we visited them. I was sweet on Raymond in those days, and although you were only a child, I was often quite jealous."

"Were you?" said Sara, wide-eyed. Then she made a little face at Jim and gave him a defiant look. "It's not supposed to be admitted, but Raymond and I are engaged to be married."

"Really!" the young widow gasped. "Why, I—didn't I hear that he was married?"

Sara flushed uncomfortably, for Jim Howland was staring at her in a most annoying and malicious manner. She would have liked to smack Jim's face for his impertinence. She gave her head a toss and ignored him.

"Raymond *was* married—to a perfectly horrid woman, I believe. But she's divorced him."

Becky took out the inevitable cigarette case.

"His wife *has* divorced him?" she repeated in her soft, precise voice.

"Well, I believe it's going on now," Sara admitted, slightly crestfallen by being pinned down to facts about this shop-soiled suitor of hers.

Becky lighted her cigarette and puffed out a thick cloud. Then she said: "I shouldn't count on it, if I were you."

Jim Howland refilled his glass from the bottle of beer he was drinking and pretended a not too absorbed interest in this conversation of the ex-schoolgirls.

"I don't think I understand," Sara said in low tones. "What do you know about Raymond's affairs?"

Her friend considered before replying, and it was obvious that she hesitated to answer the question before Jim Howland.

"Don't bother about him," Sara said impatiently. "He knows all about me, and my father's told him off to watch me. He's only a nurse, as you might say." Jim's canny, studious silence was getting on her nerves. If he kept on like that, she would be goaded into giving him that smack.

"You're not very polite to Mr. Howland," observed Becky.

Jim threw back his head with a laugh. "Good heavens, I'd drop dead if Sara ever forgot herself that far!" he exclaimed.

Tears smarted in Sara's eyes, but again she ignored him.

"Tell me what you know about Raymond?" she demanded. "If you *do* know anything—that is. I have a right to be told, Becky."

Becky's babyish eyes narrowed and there was something faintly hostile in their glittering blue depths.

"Well, I know this, that no woman can divorce him because it happens that he isn't married. He tried the same game on with me, and it worked. He got the little fortune that came to me from my grandfather. It wasn't an awful lot, but it was enough to keep me in comfort and a certain amount of luxury.

"He tore my life to tatters and I've had to live the best way I could. I've been on the stage and in the films, but I'm no actress and never got above chorus and crowd work. I've done other things. I've even helped Raymond with schemes that should have landed him in prison.

"Listen, Sara. What I'm telling you is true, every word of it. I got wind of what he's up to now and taxed him with it, and he told me that as soon as he got some money out of your father, he would marry me. Now you know what I know of Raymond Lacosta's affairs. I won't let him ruin your life as he's ruined mine, if I can help it."

Sara sat trembling and aghast. One of her shaking hands worked toward Jim as though for protection and he clasped it warmly. "It isn't true—it isn't true!" she whimpered over and over again.

Becky Marchand lit another cigarette.

"You'll find that it is—but you may make the discovery too late. Let me tell you something—he's got the devil on his side. Perhaps you don't believe in a spirit of evil? Let me ask you something—have you ever heard the music they play for the dancing girls in this country, particularly the drum?"

Sara gave a shuddering cry. "Yes—horrible! It frightened me half out of my wits."

"Then you know what I mean," Becky said quietly. "There's supposed to be another sort of drum, which isn't evil, but I've never heard it. The Arabs go into the desert to listen to it. They have all sorts of superstitions, these people, and they love to make a mystery of everything. I feel that the desert has an evil spirit brooding over it, but the Arabs say that one must seek the spirit of good in the desert, and until you've done that and discovered it, there's no peace for your soul."

Jim Howland coughed and made a restless movement.

He didn't like the close attention Sara was giving to her friend's curious line of talk. He didn't, on the whole, like Becky Marchand. In spite of the excellent advice she had given on the subject of Raymond Lacosta, and the light she had tried to throw on his methods, Jim did not wholly trust Becky. He felt jealously protective of Sara and very sorry for the hurt she had received even though it might be ultimately for her immense good.

"What I want to tell you most of all is," Becky added, "that you will have to be on your guard against Raymond, if you ever decide to see him again. But if you're wise, Sara, you won't see him."

"I promised to give him a chance," Sara said with a little grit of her teeth. "He wrote that people were telling lies about him, and he begged me to wait until he could prove that they are lies. I had a letter from him this morning, and he'll be in Tunis at the end of next week. So you see, he's no coward. He wouldn't face such accusations if he was a coward, would he?"

Becky Marchand got up in great agitation, collecting her handbag, cigarette case and gloves.

"I didn't know that," she said. "I didn't know he was coming here. Please forgive me for leaving you so hurriedly, but I see a train in the station and perhaps I can catch it if I run. Remember what I said, Sara. It's all true!"

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

First Aid for Skeeter Butts

By E. K. MEANS

SKEETER BUTTS laid aside the ragged sheets of a daily paper and lighted a cigarette. His eyes photographed the street which stretched out before him—as far as he could see he was the only living human being upon the public highway.

A somnolent mule rested his chin upon the top rail of a fence and moved his heavy ears only to escape the annoyance of the buffalo gnats. A drowsy dog moved at intervals, spurred to action by the torture of a flea. A weary hen slept in a dust-heap fluttering a languid wing only when a lazy breeze swept dust into her eyes.

"Gosh!" Skeeter sighed, as he turned his gaze back to the paper he had dropped at his feet. "I wus jes' readin' whar some fellers wus diggin' in de ground huntin' fer a buried city. I knows whar dey kin find a dead town widout diggin' fer it. Tickfall am dead—it don't tick no more. It's been dead a long time an' don't know it."

Sitting in the door of his business house which he called "The Hen-scratch," his saddle-colored face assumed lines of wretchedness, as if sorrowing over the deadness of the village.

His high, white collar pinched him under the chin, and while he took great pride in being the dressiest negro in Tickfall, he felt that he was now alone, sitting up with a corpse, so he removed it from his neck. He felt of his closely cropped hair, the part made in the middle with a razor. He inspected the crease to his trousers, and lifted each foot up to his face and blew the dust off his patent-leather shoes. Then he reached back lazily and brought forth a banjo from inside the door.

He couldn't summon enough energy to think of any tune he wanted to play, so he just fingered the strings—here a *plunk* and there a *plunk* and now and then a *plunk-plunk*.

A strange dog appeared from around the corner of the house. He woke up the mule;

he aroused the other dog to a friendly interview; he flustered the hen and sent her squawking under the Hen-scratch.

"Huh!" Skeeter grunted. "Dat's de dern dawg whut snuck in de back door an' e't up all my sandwich meat dis mawnin'."

He quietly placed his banjo back where he got it and stretching his arm without moving from his seat, he brought forth a small target rifle.

"Spat!"

There was a yelp of surprise and pain and the dog went up the street in a cloud of dust, searching his soul for sounds to tell how hurt he was.

At this same moment there was a loud wail of pain and fright from another direction and this time the sounds were human and made Skeeter wince with fearful anticipation.

"My Gawd!" he sighed. "I wonder ef dat little bullet went through dat dawg, bounced and skooted off somewhar an' kilt a nigger!"

Then came a series of wild shrieks and a fat negro girl nearly grown, closely followed by a squalling white girl about six years old, came running down the road, screaming, clawing at their faces, fanning the air with their arms. Skeeter ran to the rescue.

A wasp slapped him on the side of his face. He felt like he had been hit with a baseball bat. He staggered and was about to fall when another wasp attacked him in the rear and boosted him about forty feet down the road. Several more irate insects assisted him further along and the three took refuge in the Hen-scratch and slammed the door.

"Whut in de name of mud is done happened to us?" Skeeter wanted to know, as he rubbed the hot places on his anatomy and tried to make his voice heard above the shrieks of the white child and the lamentations of the colored nurse.

"Dis here idjut white chile wus prancin' aroun' my cabin lookin' fer some kind of devilmint to git into, and she picked a wasp nest offen de shed fer a play-pretty," the nurse explained. "I never did see a white chile whut had any sense. Now whut de debbil am I gwine do wid her? Listen at her bawl!"

"Git some anarchy an' put it on de places whar de kid got stung at," Skeeter howled above the din. "Fetch me some, too. I'm dyin'! Helen Blazes is done bust out on my hide."

He broke the paper from a cigarette, placed the tobacco in his mouth and then applied the moistened substance to the swollen places on his face and neck. But as the tobacco was ninety per cent alfalfa hay, he did not find it efficacious in relieving the stings.

In the meanwhile the nurse ran over to her house and came back with a bottle of black liquid which she applied freely to the arms and the face of the little white girl. It dried quickly. Skeeter also made liberal applications of the same remedy and then noticed that the white child was stained as if by walnut juice and was a ridiculous sight to behold.

"Whoopee-e!" Skeeter howled. "Whut you done put on dat chile's mug? Look at her—she's turnin' black as you is!"

"Dis am iodine," the nurse said, holding up the bottle. "You tole me to git iodine, didn't you?"

"Naw, Toony!" Skeeter said sadly. "I tole you to git anarchy."

"Ain't got no anarchy," Toony replied sullenly.

"You better wish you had had it, Toon," Skeeter told her earnestly. "Dat iodine stain won't come off dat white skin fer a year and dat gal's mammy ain't gwine be so awful proud of her baby's decorooshins when she sees how you done ornamented her up."

"I guess dis am one mo' job I'm as good as lost," Toon said as she tenderly fingered the painful and swollen places on her arms and neck. "I might as well call myself not wuckin' no more atter today."

"Take dat brat home an' esplain to her maw befo' de black gits any blacker an' mebbe you kin git by," Skeeter snickered.

"No hopes," Toony said listlessly. "Dat white woman done gimme my orders not to tote dis white chile down to dis cabin an' now I'll git kotch up."

The two dragged themselves out of the Hen-scratch, and Skeeter went to what had

once been a bar mirror in a saloon before prohibition put him out of business, and surveyed the stung places on his face. Where he had rubbed the iodine, there were black spots upon his yellow skin, each about as large as a silver dollar.

"I done spile my own beauty, too," Skeeter grinned.

Then he went and sat down in the doorway again. Once more Tickfall was slumberous in the summer sun.

II.

In the afternoon Vinegar Atts, pastor of the Shoo-fly church, came puffing down the street like a steamboat navigating in shallow water. He was a big man, wearing a long-tailed coat and a high silk hat, moon-faced and so fat that he looked like he had a wash-pot concealed under his vest.

He paused where Skeeter was again occupying his favorite seat upon the doorstep and demanded:

"Did you kill a dawg dis mawnin'?"

"Naw, suh, I ain't, so to speak, kilt none," Skeeter told him. "But I took a shot at one wid a little target gun an' he let out a yip or two and oozed away so fast I didn't see ef he died or not. He raised too much dust when he skedaddled."

"You kilt him all right," Vinegar assured him. "He b'longed to a white man."

"Dat's bad luck," Skeeter replied, showing the whites of his eyes and glancing about as if contemplating flight. "I'm got a hunch dat I'll gwine hab to run a footrace."

"Yes, suh. He b'longed to de daddy of dat little white chile whut got mixed up wid de hornet's nest. Her maw is mad at Toony an' her paw is mad at you."

"Is he sayin' any words?" Skeeter asked uneasily.

"Not to me," Vinegar told him. "He ain't bragged no brags about whut he craved to do to you, but I'm shore he aims to do it. I heard tell he wus lookin' fer you an' I bet he ain't huntin' you up to gib you no admiration seegar."

"Whut name do he call hisself by?" Skeeter asked.

"He calls hisself Lanier from Texas," Vinegar announced. "He's one of dese here two-gun gents from de movie-picter Far West. He's travelin' aroun' in a automobile wid his fambly an' is visitin' Marse Tom Gaitskill now."

"Mebbe he won't be here but a few days an' I kin dodge him," Skeeter said hopefully. "Whut do he look like?"

"He looks fat an' hot all de time," Vinegar explained. "When he smokes, he chaws his seegars all up an' is always spittin' out de ravelin's. I bet he loves to chaw niggers up an' spit 'em out, too."

"Ain't dat too bad," Skeeter sighed. "An' me, I'm always been a peaceful man wid a kind heart an' a gentle disposish an' a deesire to please."

"You don't please nobody when you shoots deir dawg," Vinegar told him.

"Dat little gun hadn't oughter kilt him," Skeeter complained. "It wus jes' a little bullet an' de gun didn't go loud a-tall. Spat!"

"Well, good-by, brudder!" Vinegar concluded. "Ef dat white man kills you, I'll gib you a real nice fun'ral. Whut flowers does you prefer?"

"Hush!" Skeeter wailed, fanning himself with his hat.

"De only song whut fits yo' case am dis:" Vinegar grinned. "'Let de lower lights be burnin'.'"

Vinegar had just gone when Toony came down the street vibrant with excitement and dramatic in her language and gestures.

"I done been fired, Skeeter," she ranted, "an' you is gwine be fired at. De feller whose dawg you kilt craves to meet you."

"I ain't meetin' no white men," Skeeter said fearsomely. "I prefers to be alone."

"De best way is to dig a hole an' crawl in it," Toony told him. "Ef you don't bury yo'self alive, us niggers is got a mighty good show to bury you dead."

"Whut's dat white man aimin' to do to me?" Skeeter asked.

"Gawd knows!" Toony whooped. "He's from Texas an' no man lives in Texas whut ain't kilt about two men; I heard tell it wus six."

Toony had heard nothing of the kind, but as something had been started Toony felt that she ought to make her contribution

to the movement, and she had a vivid imagination and a voluble tongue.

The news spread and caused great excitement among the colored people in Tickfall. Some folks were glad that Skeeter had reached the end of his career and was now about to die. Others speculated upon the time of the funeral and the kind of funeral that would be given to such a prominent and popular member of the Nights of Darkness lodge.

"I'll dig his grave," Pap Curtain, the yellow, monkey-faced grave-digger of Tickfall, said magnanimously. "An' it won't cost him a cent. It will be a real pleasure to me to dig Skeeter's grave."

"I'll be glad to preach his funeral fer nothin'," the Rev. Vinegar Atts asserted. "I'll consider it a favor to hab de privilege."

"Dis is awful," Skeeter wailed, as kind friends brought him all the latest reports of his predicament. "I ain't got no friend in town excusin' Marse John Flournoy. Mebbe de sheriff will he'p me."

He found the sheriff sitting on his front porch, a tall man with granite features, a mouth like a bear-trap, and big eyes which were wrinkled with the fine lines of humor. After a few preliminaries, Skeeter began:

"Marse John, I done got in a little trouble by accidently killin' a dawg. De fice b'longed to a white man an' dat man is actin' peevish."

Flournoy flicked the ashes from the end of his cigar and inspected Skeeter with twinkling eyes. For thirty years that colored man had lived in a cabin on the sheriff's premises and had paid for the occupancy of this house only by the fun he had furnished this fun-loving officer of the law. Flournoy called Skeeter "his favorite insect."

"Does the owner of the dog threaten to have you arrested, Skeeter?" Flournoy asked.

"Yes, suh, I reckon so," Skeeter replied with a shiver of anxiety.

"Did anybody see you shoot the canine?"

"Canine? Oh, you means de dawg! Naw, suh."

"Have you told anybody about it?"

"Yes, suh. I'm told plenty people I shot de dawg."

"Where is the carcass of the dog?"

"Dunno, suh."

Flournoy sat for a few minutes in silence and countless tiny wrinkles of humor formed around his fine eyes. Then he spoke:

"Now, Skeeter, if you should be arrested and brought into the police court for killing that dog, they would have to prove that you actually killed the dog."

"Yes, suh."

"No one saw you fire the shot, but you have told several people that you did shoot the dog. Now if you don't take the witness stand and testify against yourself, what you have told to others will be hearsay testimony and such will not be admitted in the court. The only proof that you killed the dog will be the dead dog itself. That's the *corpus delicti*. You had better get the body of that dead dog out of the way."

"Gosh! Marse John," Skeeter said, springing to his feet. "I kin hide a dead dawg! I'm gwine now and do it. Nobody in dis worl' will find dat dawg atter I hides him!"

Skeeter started on a trot toward the Gaitskill home where the Lanier family were visiting and where he presumed the Lanier canine had made his demise. He planned to loiter around the cowshed and the outhouses in the rear until some servant appeared who could give him information.

The sun was just sinking in the west when Skeeter appeared upon the hill where stood the old Gaitskill home. Skeeter was attracted by a group of boys and girls who were assembled in an abandoned flower garden at the edge of the large lawn.

Skeeter realized the situation at once. It was the funeral of the dog.

Concealing himself behind a thick hedge, Skeeter crept near enough to see and hear what was taking place. Beside a hole in the ground was a large paper box in which the children intended to deposit the dog for interment—when they got through with him. But just at that time they had other uses for that canine. They had tied a rope around his neck, had thrown the rope over a limb of a tree above their heads,

and half a dozen little boys had their hands upon the other end of the rope.

A group of little girls stood beside the hole in the ground, forming a choir of funereal singers, the director of the chorus being the swollen-faced, iodine-spotted little girl who had picked the wasp-nest for a play-pretty. Their baby voices began:

" Love lifted me!"

At the same moment, the boys gave the rope a tug and the deceased dog ascended until his head touched the limb of the tree above. Quickly the carcass was lowered, and the second stanza was a signal to start the hoist again:

" Love lifted me!"

The boys released the rope, the fice slipped back to the earth, and once more came the cue to elevate him:

" When I was sinking, sinking down
Love—lifted—me!"

This ceremony must have been going on all afternoon for the children looked weary and the carcass of the dog showed signs of wear and tear and rough usage. One little boy in the group was an African. He sat down upon the ground, the sweat streaming from his genial face, and ruefully observed the palms of his hands.

" My hands is plum' wore out," he announced, with a wide and toothsome grin. " I never saw such carry-ons at a funeral nohow in all my nachel-bawn days. Excusin' dat, it's gittin' dark, an' I'm skeart to go home in de night time by myself."

" Don't go yet, Empty," urged the little girl whose face was swollen and splotched with the marks of iodine, and who was chief mourner at the obsequies, the dog being a member of the family up to the time of his decease. " Don't go! You got to fill up the grave!"

Then followed the interment and the flower-decked mound, and the head-board suitably inscribed. Two little girls working with a stub pencil, the end of which they had to moisten many times with their tongues, managed the epitaph:

NICK
KILED BY A NIGER

This was inscribed upon the white, smooth surface of a pine shingle. Then a hasty consultation was held by the white children who cast covert glances toward the Ethiopian, Empty, who had filled the grave and had seated himself again upon the ground and was licking his blistered hands and rubbing dirt upon the sore spots.

In the consultation, the white children agreed that Empty might be offended by a certain word in the epitaph, so they amended by drawing a line through the word " niger," and the revised version was:

KILED BY A ~~NIGER~~ COLRD PERSON

But Empty could not read, and he would not have cared a hoot in hellelujah about it anyhow.

The shadows were lengthening. Skeeter shook the hedge, on the other side of which he was hiding, and growled like a dog. With a frightened glance in that direction, the children fled.

Two minutes later, Skeeter was running down the hill, carrying under his arm the box which contained the evidence against him which the sheriff had designated as the *corpus delicti*.

III.

For the first time for many years, Skeeter had a " sign out " to his fellow members of the Nights of Darkness lodge. His trouble call sounded through all the colored circles of Tickfall and his friends came to him in a noble desire to help the brother in distress.

First, they assembled in the lodge-room, called the roll, discussed the predicament into which Skeeter had precipitated himself, and then decided to wait on Skeeter in a body and ascertain what he thought they ought to do to help him.

He received forty of them in the Henscratch, and their mere presence threw him into a wilder panic.

" Whut you want us to do to he'p you, brudder?" Vinegar Atts inquired.

" Gawd knows," Skeeter wailed, frightened out of his wits. " Do whutever you thinks is best fer me."

" Mebbe us better hold a council on you," Vinegar suggested. " Would you

wish us to council here or go back to de lodge?"

"Naw! Stay wid me!" Skeeter howled.

"All right!" Vinegar agreed. "Now, brudders, we listens to yo' advices."

"I figger Skeeter oughter leave town till dese here calamities is passed over," Figger Bush suggested. "Dar is plenty good hidin' places in de woods, and he could live on blackberries an' crawfish an' drink water outen de ole cypress stumps all filled wid wiggle-tails an' rough it dat way, an' we could tell him when he could come back 'thout no danger."

"De trouble is, Skeeter is knowed too good," Pap Curtain snarled. "Eve'ywhar Skeeter shows his yeller mug, somebody is done seen dat face before."

"Eve'y nigger oughter be black," Hitch Diamond growled. "It he'ps him to hide in a crowd of blacks when trouble comes. Now me," complacently, "I'm blacker dan a deep hole in de ground in de dark night time. When I shuts my eyes, nobody kin see me."

"You shore is deep dark black colored," Vinegar agreed. "De good Lawd dipped you in de blackin' pot twice."

"I motions we black Skeeter!" Figger Bush howled. "Look at dem black spots on his jaw and neck whar dem wasps stung him. He put medicine on dem stings an' it changed his nachel-bawn color."

With a sudden hope, Skeeter turned his eyes toward the bottle of iodine which Toony had left with him earlier in the day. It would certainly make him a darker color if there was any advantage in that in the present emergency.

"I'm got de same kind of paint dat I put on fer de bee-stings, fellers," he said uncertainly. "But whut good am it gwine do to put it on?"

"Disguise yo'self!" Figger howled. "Dat's whut all criminals tries to do to escape from de law."

"You done kilt a dawg an' yo' life is in danger," Pap Curtain urged. "You might try a change of color to save yo' life. Of co'se, ef you git kilt, we will promise to keep you till de color fades so you will look nachel."

"I don't mind tryin' it," Skeeter announced, as he went to the shelf and brought down the bottle of iodine. "I've painted up plenty of times fer nigger minstrel shows."

He stood before the large bar mirror while forty friends stood around him, eagerly watching the operation by gazing at his face in the glass. With a small sponge Skeeter applied the stain, evenly, expertly, with the long practice of the actor, for Skeeter had taken part in many amateur theatricals. Figger applied the finishing touches to the back of his ears and the back of his neck, and Skeeter Butts was disguised!

"How do she look, brudders?" Skeeter asked, as he turned his face toward them.

"Yo' face is got a kind of sick look," Vinegar commented.

"I got a kind of sick feel inside me, too," Skeeter remarked weakly. "Whut ails me is, I don't know ef I'm gwine be beat up, shot up, or jes' arrested and put in jail. I don't know whether to git ready fer a fight or a foot-race."

"Who knows jes' whut kind of trouble Skeeter is in?" Vinegar asked in a loud voice.

"I kin tell whut I knows," Hitch Diamond announced. "I wucks fer Marse Tom Gaitskill an' I was in de back of de place dis mawnin' when dat purp come crawlin' in an' died on us. De women folks wus a-squawkin' like a lot of hens, an' de little gal wus squallin' 'bout de bee-stings an' de dawg, an' ole man Lanier come out an' looked at de fice an' axed who kilt it, an' Toony up'n told him. He axed whar you lived an' Toony up'n told him. He axed whut bizzness you wus in, an' Toony up'n told him. Den he grunted an' walked in de house."

"Did he look mad?" Pap Curtain asked.

"He always looks mad," Hitch told him.

"I mean did he ack like he wus hot," Pap exclaimed.

"He always acks hot," Hitch said. "He talks hot, too. He's a hot member. He's one of dem fat men dat is always boilin' over like a cook-pot."

"Dat's bad news for Skeeter," Vinegar said in a sympathetic tone.

At this moment an automobile stopped

in front of the Hen-scratch and every negro jumped and caught his breath. The door was thrust open by a fat, hot, angry-looking man, who strode to the middle of the room and fixed his bloodshot eyes on Skeeter Butts.

"Are you Skeeter Butts?" he snapped.

"Yes, suh."

"Did you kill a dog around here this morning?"

"Naw, suh, I—" Skeeter began.

"Never mind! I reckon you don't know the dog died. Well, it did! And, by George, I owe you something!"

He thrust a hot, red, fat hand into his hip pocket and Skeeter tried to get ready to die.

But the hand drew out a fat wallet, extracted a five-dollar bill, and handed it to Skeeter.

"I've been pestered with that damn dog ever since I left Texas," Mr. Lanier explained. "It looked like I would have to ride all over the United States with that pup on the seat beside me licking my hand and slapping me in the face with his tail."

Skeeter stared at him as one hypnotized.

"I couldn't do anything about it, you know," Mr. Lanier continued. "Little girl and wife with me, you know—women folks! I ain't afraid to meet the devil and tell him what to do and where to go, but women folks—huh! that's different!"

Mr. Lanier stopped suddenly and stared at Skeeter.

"What the devil is the matter with your face?" he demanded. "It's got a slick, shiny look!"

Skeeter muttered something about bee-stings.

"Oh, yes, my little girl got stung, too! Well, that five dollars is yours with my thanks for your kindly service. You've been a great blessing to me. Don't tell any of my women folks I gave you the money and don't spend it foolish!"

THE END

HABIT

HABIT is a cord so slight,
You cannot feel its touch,
And yet a cable of such strength,
That when you're in its clutch,
Though you may struggle day by day,
You'll find it hard to break away.

Habit is a tyrant that
May hold you firm and fast.
If you take up with evil ones,
Your whole life they will blast.
You form the habit first, 'tis true.
Alas! the habit then forms you.

Habit has a mighty power
To sway, for good or ill,
But it is left for you to choose
Your habits as you will.
If you but make a choice that's wise,
Then, step by step, through life you'll rise.

Ida M. Thomas.

The Starlit Trail

By KENNETH PERKINS

Author of "The Bull-Dogger," "The Gun-Fanner," etc.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

REVERDY TRIUMPHANT.

WHEN they heard that Sheriff Hornuff had come back, a crowd of women went to the street and ambushed him with frantic questions:

"Anything new, chief? Are they safe—those men down there? What are the Injuns goin' to do? Are they goin' to climb down the cliffs? Can they break through the gorge? Any one hit yet? Is my John all right? Is my Pete safe? How come Plunk Reverdy's back? Will we all git killed, chief?"

The one who was first to reach the door was Nellie Brower. But it was not to see the sheriff.

Upon first hearing that Reverdy had come back riding with Sheriff Hornuff, she could not believe. Her heart leaped, she was dazed. What was this miracle that had happened? Her lover returned from what every one thought was the dead! It could not be. But her daze was only momentary. She turned about and sped across the sawdust-strewn dance floor. She was the first one out in the starlight.

The firing down in the gulch and the winking lights and distant cracking of gunfire on the cañon rim seemed to have redoubled. The riders whom the sheriff had left in town were galloping down the street to meet him. And then came that fusillade of questions from terror-stricken mothers and grandmothers.

In that confusion of sight and sound Nell Brower saw the one dominant, commanding figure. He was there seated in his saddle, his horse thrusting its head into a band of yellow light. Nell did not notice the horse.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for November 7.

She did not see the white-speckled face, although that was a detail as vital to her life as to the life of her lover. She saw only Reverdy himself sitting there—strangely triumphant, even in this hour of imminent tragedy.

He was supernatural to her, because he had been "tortured to death," and now he had returned to earth—a ghostly looming form.

The anguish in Nell Brower's heart was swept away. She heard no more wailing of Mexican *señoras*, no shouting of commands, no galloping of horsemen this way and that. The crackling of distant gunfire had turned to a melody. Music was vibrant in that desert breeze. The stark gash in the desert's breast, called Goldpan Cañon, had turned to Paradise.

They were not devils up there firing into a caldron of hell; they were angels—all of Powderhorn's men—because they had given back her lover to her!

Reverdy saw her. He heard her cry of joy. He pressed his mount over to the board sidewalk, reached down with his arm, and lifted her from her feet. She threw her arms about him—and in that kiss the tragedy of his past, the tragedy of the present in which the town was racked, and all fear of any tragedy to come, was wiped away.

Old Sheriff Hornuff was shouting his orders.

"Get into your shacks!" he yelled to the women and children. "Shut up, and clear the streets! No, don't put the lights out yet! Ain't no cause, till Powderhorn gits into the cañon. Then everybody's to git together in the cantina. Meanwhile, keep that vestibule clear in the Rex Hotel for to tend any one which is hit. They'll be a few, but don't worry; and don't ax fool questions.

"Yes, damn it, Powderhorn's here and they's a thousand Indians circumnavigatin' us, and we're goin' to fight like hell. That's the answer to all your questions."

He turned to the horsemen he had left in the street as reserve.

"Three of you men shag down to the gulch. And keep behind the bowlders and crawl through mesquite. They're rainin' lead on 'em thick and fast."

He looked back and saw Reverdy and Nell Brower.

"And some one git Plunk a gun—a good clean one. And likewise a fresh mount."

In rapidly spoken sentences Plunk had told the girl of his acquittal in Powderhorn's strange court; of Powderhorn's discovery that he was not the right man; of his escape and his fight with that outlaw horse.

"And he's going to fight again, this man-killer," he said. "I've felt him gathering steam all the way from Desolation to Goldpan Gulch. I'm holding him in tight—and he's petered out. But when he blows up, all Mule Town's going to see what happened to me that day when I left your granddad and his household to the mercy of those outlaws.

"He'll blow up again—don't worry about that. Maybe not right away; maybe not to-night. But sooner or later he's going to turn into a grizzly bear. And when he rubs his nose on some one's shoulder—watch out!"

The girl drew back. Something had startled her. She let out a voiceless cry, and her face—revealed clearly in the light of one of the windows—was transfixed.

"What's wrong? He's all right. I've got him in hand. The old devil's too tuckered out. He won't hurt you."

But the girl had not thought of the horse. In fact, even while Reverdy was speaking to her, she had been thinking of something else.

She remembered how Slink Bottiler had crawled away—a grin on his face. She had watched him—with a feeling akin to one watching a Gila monster crawling off under a rock.

Then some one had called out that the sheriff and Plunk Reverdy were riding down the street. Before she had fully realized the meaning of that precious name a vision of Slink Bottiler's face was photographed upon her mind.

The face had paled. Although to say it had paled does not express the actual color transformation which took place. The skin turned yellow—with red splotches left—like the yellowish red of a Gila monster. The lips were drawn tighter, the grin remain-

ing. Nell Brower had never seen a mask so eloquent of surprise and terror. But in her own ecstasy at hearing her lover's name called she had forgotten for the moment this hideous thing.

And now it came up before her—as clearly etched as if it were the living mask. Without any process of logical reasoning, the girl jumped wildly to the conclusion that Slink would make an attempt upon Reverdy's life.

As a matter of fact, her intuitive judgment was sound. Reverdy was the only man who could accuse Bottiler. The latter could kill him with impunity. He could justify his deed by announcing that Reverdy, in escaping from Powderhorn, had escaped the punishment due him—and likewise had brought this horde of Indians upon Mule Town.

Nell saw a furtive figure squeeze through the crowd of women at the cantina door, slink over toward the water trough, raise a gun.

The girl screamed and ran toward the assassin. No one heard that scream. No one knew that anything had happened. The sheriff was a little way off, giving parting instructions to a detachment of riders. A heated duel was going on in the gulch. A fusillade of continual fire cracked out on both rims of the cañon walls. Horses champed, wheeled, or ran at a loud clip-clop of hoofs down the street.

A shot spurted from behind the trough. It was deafening in comparison to the distant echoes of the raiders. Every one in the street turned to look. It was like a gong startling the race horses in their paddock. That is to say, every one jumped nervously, then waited.

Nell Brower was standing there, partly revealed in a band of yellow lamplight from the Rex cantina door. At her knees was a cringing black figure. A few yards off, Reverdy was clutching at his shoulder. No one could guess what was wrong with him, until he swayed in his saddle, leaned forward over the horse's withers, and then let himself fall limply to the ground.

He stood a moment, reaching for one of the uprights that held the gallery of the Rex shack.

Then the crowd burst out:

"What-all's happening? Reverdy—he's hit!"

"An Injun must of sneaked in, chief!"

"Reverdy's the man they want. Give him up to them without no more fightin'!"

"Reverdy—he escaped, and they've followed him."

"He's the cause of it all. Give him up! Save the town! He's no good! How'd he git back, anyway?"

Slink Bottiler, on his knees in the darkness behind the water trough, must have understood the sentiment of that town. He had given his position away by firing that shot. But what of it? If he killed this man, who would blame him? If he killed him, Slink would be free. For there was no one else in the world who knew who Slink really was.

He raised his gun again. A crowd of women must have seen him this time—although it was dark and there was much confusion.

And one of those women stopped his gesture.

He felt a touch of cold steel against his leathery neck. He held his right arm rigid where he had lifted it.

"Drop your gun," he heard a voice say. He recognized that voice very well. It was calm, sweet, vibrant. He visualized it as coming from a serene but tragic face. The gun clattered to the street.

Nell Brower picked it up. Her one thought then, as before, was not for this rat, but for her wounded lover. She elbowed her way through the crowd that had gathered about.

Slink jumped to his feet, baffled and enraged. A woman had held him up. Luck had been against him; his victim was not yet dead. He came out into the light with the recklessness of desperation.

The crowd saw a misshapen and hideous figure with mouth trembling like a rat that smells danger. They heard a high-pitched, hysterical voice rasping out:

"Finish him up, I tell yer!" Slink was crying. "*He's* the man Powderhorn wants! He's the horse thief! Give him back to the big chief and save yourselves! Don't listen to his damned lies, I tell yer! Leave

me take another pot at him! Finish him up and give his carcass to the Injuns, or we'll all be scalped! Are you all daft? No, don't bind his arm! Kill him—kill the rattler—or we're all lost, so help me God!"

The screeching stopped abruptly. Slink Bottiler saw a man emerge from that group—a young, haggard man with a face gray and terrible.

The town was on Slink's side. But was the town against this adversary?

Bottiler darted a glance down the street, then up. The sheriff had ridden to see what that shot meant. Could the sheriff save him? Could any mortal save him? What if they listened to the truth? What if no one stopped that gaunt wounded man? His head darted this way and that—like a cornered snake. He saw a horse. He leaped for it with an agility that was like magic in that confused light.

He threw the reins over the animal's head and jumped aboard. He did not cross those reins—what reason had he to cross them? He yanked the horse's head about and swung through a shaft of yellow light from the window of the Rex Hotel.

Sheriff Hornuff, arriving on the scene, noticed now, for the first time since Plunk Reverdy had come from Powderhorn's settlement, that the horse had a face speckled white as with stars.

Yes, Sheriff Hornuff had arrived upon the scene. Old Hornuff, who had ruled that range for thirty years. The man who had judged men, who had freed them, who had hanged them; the man who had kept peace with Powderhorn when Federal Indian agents and army majors had failed. And here he was with a hundred and fifty lives apportioned by God to his stewardship.

Helpless children and frantic mothers surrounded him. The cañon walls echoed with the sound of gunfire. Powderhorn's machine gun at the gateway to Goldpan Gulch was sputtering like a company of riflemen. And yet in that chaos of tragedy old Hornuff noticed the white-speckled face of that horse!

He remembered there was another tragedy as great as the one now besetting the whole town. It was as poignant and vital even though it concerned only one man—and his mate.

And the key to that tragedy was this old petered-out fuzztail which was the nearest horse to Slink Bottiler when that terror-stricken little hombre made up his mind to leave town.

Just where Slink thought he was going the sheriff could not imagine. Perhaps to hide in some ravine just outside of town. Perhaps even to rush into the hands of the Indians. For that's what would have happened if he had traveled very far. But there he was in the saddle of Reverdy's horse, willing to ride anywhere so long as he could get away from that gray-faced, wounded man.

And what happened then was a sudden unraveling of that youth's tragedy—a tragedy which had so baffled Sheriff Hornuff. The sheriff saw, and every one in that street saw, that Plunk's incredible tale of an old and gentle-looking horse turning into a demon, in the wink of an eye, was true. Without so much as tensing up to throw back or giving the slightest sound by any muscle, the old beast leaped into the air. His hindquarters snapped up; he sunfished and came down on alternate front feet, lurching to the side as well as giving a terrific downright shock.

A little ragged form like a stuffed gunnysack went hurtling through the air, catapulted from the saddle against the wall of the Rex Hotel. Slink Bottiler went so high that he almost hit the gallery in front of the shack. An upright caught him, a thwack against his side, and he fell midway in his flight..

If you threw an egg against a post, and it squashed and fell, it would have simulated the trajectory of Bottiler's flight. It looked as if all the sheriff's horses and all his men could not have put that carcass of bones and skin together again. At that, the old cayuse was not satisfied. He turned upon the fallen rider like a—well, there is no simile more effective than the truth—like a stallion bent on killing a hated man.

Sheriff Hornuff was impressed—rather slowly, perhaps—that it was his duty to interrupt that bloody scene. He might have shot the maddened brute down; but for

some reason or other he admired that horse. He loved him. He wanted to cheer him for what he had done.

He had cleared the stain from Plunk Reverdy's life—an event for which Hornuff had been yearning for every hour of the last two months.

Hornuff jumped for the stallion's bridle. He twisted the bight of the reins about the animal's nose in the form of a tourniquet. Slink Bottiler, lying dazed against the gallery post, was saved from the forestriking hoofs.

But had he been fully conscious he would have preferred them to the doom that was in store for him.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE RAID.

HORNUFF could give no more time to the crisis of that drama—the drama of Plunk Reverdy's life. There were a hundred and fifty other lives at stake. Even now some horsemen were riding up from Goldpan Gulch. Three of the men were wounded.

"They's others down there that's been hit, chief—Joe Wincoop, Barkis, Hornby. We cain't hold it. The firin' from the cañon rim is pickin' us off. In the mornin' when they have light they'll finish us in a jiffy."

"We won't last till mornin'," said another. "You need ten more men down there right now. The bullets are flyin' like bees. They're firin' behind and in front and on all sides and above them bowlders—everythin' but chippin' 'em to pieces afore our eyes."

"Don't send me back thar, chief. I'll fight—even though I'm creased in the shoulder—but I ain't goin' to fight down there in Goldpan. The whole twenty you posted thar will be wiped out in fifteen minutes—"

"And Powderhorn will march in."

"Chief, it's no use. They've got a machine gun. It's only because they can't use it right that they's any of us left to tell the tale."

"They ain't a spot of sand or clump of mesquite, chief, that ain't red hot with whizzin' lead. A dozen of our men is wounded down thataway, and they can't get home without they pass through that machine gun fire. I got through because they was reloadin'—which it took 'em a convenient long time."

"Six more of you go down to Goldpan Gulch," the sheriff shouted to the horsemen he held in reserve. He turned to the crowd of women. "Put out the lights in every shack 'ceptin' in this cantina. Take whoever's hit in thar for to be 'tended to. Women and kids get offen the street—like I've ordered a dozen times.

"Git all the buckets you can and fill 'em with water. If Powderhorn gits in he will set fire to the shacks on the edge of town. That don't mean you womenfolk must leave the cantina. Not till I git back and give the order. When the Indians get into town, all men rally around this here shack."

The women crowded back to the big dance hall.

Plunk Reverdy stood there with Nell Brower cleansing and binding his wound. Slink Bottiler lay upon the board sidewalk groaning. And there was more groaning on the part of the wounded men as they were helped from their saddles and taken into the vestibule of the hotel. One of Hornuff's mozos stood with the outlaw horse, holding the tourniquet. The old devil's flanks were trembling, his tail swished, he pawed at the ground. But he was spent. There was no more fight ever seen in him from that night on.

"All right, men—get to your posts," the sheriff commanded. "I'll ride down to Goldpan agin and see how the fight is goin'. Tell whoever you see that we're fightin' now with our backs ag'in' the wall. Cain't spare any more extry men. Got to use 'em all watchin' the east and west cliffs. Otherwise, Powderhorn's breeds will come trailin' down over 'em like a cascade."

The sheriff was about to wheel his horse and head for Goldpan when Reverdy came down from the sidewalk, staggering slightly.

"Wait a minute, chief."

Hornuff looked down at him. "What's the matter, Plunk. You foldin' up?"

"No, I'm all right. It's only a crease. I want to—"

"You ain't goin' to be sent nowhere to do no shootin! You let that gal take you in and give you a jolt of whisky."

"No, chief. You listen to me—" He clung to the saddlehorn.

"What's the matter, Plunk. You dyin'? You've got a funny look in your face."

"It's the same look you've got in yours, chief. I've listened to everything. And I know what's happening. So do you. We cain't hold 'em off. I can see it in your eyes."

"The hell you can!" the irascible old fellow snorted. "We're killin' six to every one of us which falls. And I'm goin' down to kill six more and then twenty. Brace up—and tell the womenfolk to calm down and be ready with the water."

"Look back there, chief!" Plunk cried. "Powderhorn's busted through the gulch. There's a shack burning."

"Well, the damn, hell-bent, murderous skunks!" the sheriff exploded. "If they touch a single one of our womenfolk, I'll have every breed and Injun in Arizony wiped off'n the earth!"

"It's the machine gun that's opening the way for 'em, chief. You know that."

"I know that our men are showin' yaller. The machine gun's bluffed 'em out, that's what. I'll ride down thar and bust it up with my bare hands!"

He called to two of his deputies. "Get some of them men from the east of town to follow me. The breeds have got into the cañon through the gulch and we got to fight 'em in open ground. Get as many riders as you kin.

"And any of them cantina gals as can tote a gun—let 'em foller. Deploy out in a line. Keep behind bowlders and shacks. Wait till the breeds get in as far as the water tower, then pelt 'em."

The women at the door of the cantina spread these words to their companions.

"I kin still fight, chief!" one of the men said who was being helped up the steps of the Rex Hotel.

"So can I, chief," said another. "They've fixed my crease up allright. My right arm's still kickin'."

"I know how to shoot Injuns, chief!" a kid cried.

A woman in a gingham dress, a white-haired woman; a girl with spangled gown and silk stockings, a radiant girl with black ringlets—I mean Nell Brower—all gathered about the sheriff. They were armed and eager.

They were eager—as the sheriff knew—not so much to fight as to die. For fighting would avail little now.

"Better git some of the Mexes diggin' trenches around the cantina, chief," a deputy suggested. "And make fortifications with barrels and buckboards."

The smoke from the shacks down there toward the gulch was wafted toward them. A red flame revealed the Indians on the cañon rim, riding in an endless file.

"It's too late for digging trenches," said old Hornuff. "You women come along with me. I'm goin' to git every fighter we've got and stretch a line from wall to wall of the cañon. It'll be our last line—and remember that while you're fightin'!"

The sheriff wheeled his horse and galloped down the street, followed by the few remaining horsemen he had. The women who had enlisted trailed along behind, some mounted, others piling into a buckboard.

Nell Brower who had elected herself to be of that heroic number, was the last to leave. She went to Plunk first, helping him tenderly to the door of the Rex Hotel. He sank upon the steps, faint with the loss of blood.

As she kissed him and said good-by, he looked up in astonishment. What did this mean? Nell Brower—and those women going out to fight, while he remained, exhausted, baffled, wounded upon those steps? What a hideous reversal had overtaken them!

"Where are you going, child!" he exclaimed, coming slowly to realize what had happened. "Not down there—"

"Yes." She was serene. Her voice was at once calm and exultant. Victory had already come. "Don't try to follow. You can't use a gun now. I can."

She had expected that he would prevent her going—or else that he would try to follow. She was surprised that his own voice was like hers—serene, with a strange mixture of resignation and triumph.

"It's all right, girl. You go on with the sheriff. Protect yourself with that six-gun if they come. But they won't come. It will all be over soon." He added as she stepped away—her hands still clutching his. "You aren't afraid? No, I see that. Don't be afraid. Remember what I say—" he spoke with a tensity that she could not understand—"it'll be over soon. And we'll be together."

She went for the horse, telling one of the old women at the Rex shack to take care of Reverdy.

The old woman came to him.

"Bring me some water," he said.

Several of the women looked at him startled. They could not interpret that voice. "Is he dying?" one asked.

"Yes, most like—no matter. We'll all be there in a jiffy."

They brought him some water. He took it. The flames to the south of the town cast their gleam upon his face. His eyes seemed to light up not so much from that lurid glare as from a fire within. He staggered again to his feet, lifting his weight by clutching at a gallery upright.

Other outlying shacks were burning now. Powderhorn and his breeds had advanced as far as the first ranch inside the cañon. The ranch house and barns, the calf sheds and hay were flaming.

Reverdy felt the soot fall upon his face; he smelled the smoke. The even glow of stars had been erased by that smoke and a fitful light was upon every face—the face of two or three wounded men, of Reverdy, of the ghastly Slink Bottiler, lying there in the gutter against the board sidewalk.

Plunk Reverdy pointed to that carcass of bones and matted hair and rags.

"Get a riata and tie up that hombre—"

At that moment Slink Bottiler was enjoying a sensation of vacuous bliss. It seemed to have taken a long time for his mind to untangle the events that had happened.

He had tried to take the life of the only man who could accuse him. He had failed. He had mounted a horse in the attempt to flee. The horse had thrown him.

Slink had come to with a symphony of glorious sounds vibrating in his ears: women's voices, the singing of a wind, the distant and soul-stirring call of desert wolves. This symphony had gradually dissolved into its true component parts—the yipping of savage Navahos, the bark of guns, the chatter of frantic mothers, the galloping of horses.

In his nostrils was the smell of smoke. Above him the sky was as red as a desert sunrise. Dry sparks mounted in a blossoming whirl. Soot caressed his cheek.

He found himself being bound by a rawhide riata.

Women were leaning over him. He mumbled incoherently: "What-all are you doin'? Bindin' me? What for? I ain't done nothin'. I'm a poor, unfortunate mucker that never did any hurt. For God's sake, what're you doin' with me?"

He began to scream. His mortal enemy—a gaunt youth with arm in a sling was standing over him. A crowd of women with gingham gleaming in the strange light were on the sidewalk. There seemed to be a deadly calm in that scene while just beyond the pandemonium of hell gripped the cañon.

"Bring me a saddle horse. And take the tourniquet off that cayuse's nose, and blindfold him with a gunny sack."

"What-all are you goin' to do with that cayuse, Plunk?" one of the old ranch wives cried. "Don't go near him. He turned bad. He'll kill yer if you go near him."

But Plunk's commands—given in a tense, pain-ridden voice—were not to be questioned.

They brought him two saddle horses as he had ordered, and one of the cantina women tied a gunnysack around the old stallion's nose. When the tourniquet was taken off, the beast had transformed himself again into a gentle old stock horse.

"All right now, hombre," Reverdy said to Slink. "Git up to your feet."

"What-all are you goin' to do with me, Plunk?" the man whimpered. "You ain't goin' to do me hurt, Plunk, are you? You're just! You'll help me. You'll save me from torture, Plunk! I'll do whatever you say—foller you anywheres; be your slave from now on, pard! Because you're a just man and—"

"Put him on that horse and cinch his heels together," Reverdy said.

Slink Bottiler fell to his knees. He gibbered hysterically at first, then he howled. They took him—and he struggled weakly. His whole performance was a pitiful and insignificant comedy in comparison to the battle down in Goldpan Gulch, to the howling of Navaho gunmen, to the lurid panorama of flame and red cliffs and stormy smoke.

A few minutes later Sheriff Hornuff saw this strange outfit riding down the cañon toward Goldpan Gulch. A wounded youth leading a blindfolded horse, and on the latter a hunched, shapeless thing bound tightly like a sack of bran.

Sheriff Hornuff had deployed all the fighters he had mustered together in a long line, from cañon wall to wall. They were crouched low, hiding behind bowlders, sand mounds, in patches of mesquite, behind tree-boles, in ravines.

Reverdy could not see how many there were—for the smoke of the burning shacks prevented this. But the line extended for half a mile with flashes of light spurting out of every fifty feet. All of Mule Town that could bear arms was in that line. That is to say, all save the men Hornuff had posted on the three other sides of the town to watch the cañon walls. This was the last line of defense. If it broke through, not a man, woman or child in Mule Town would be spared.

Sheriff Hornuff riding up and down the little battle line was the first to see Reverdy approaching.

"Where-all do you think you're headin' for, Plunk?" he asked.

"I'm going to take this hombre to Powderhorn."

"Don't make me laugh."

Slink Bottiler was moaning softly. He was out of his head, like a victim being carried off by a beast of prey. In a circumstance of this sort, so it has been said, the victim is apt to be too dazed for fright.

"Where's the girl?" Plunk asked.

"What girl? Nell? Behind a bowlder over there fightin' like hell."

"Tell her that I'll be back," said Reverdy as he dug his heels into the flanks of his mount. The horse sprang down the adobe bank.

The blindfolded stallion with his cargo came stumbling after.

Hornuff dismounted and crawled up to the firing line. He kept under the lee of a bowlder, for the Navahos were crawling into the cañon yard by yard. They hurled their streaks of fire from the mesquite patches. Hornuff could catch a glimpse of a ragged form, a tall peaked sombrero, or the war regalia of a brave. They were getting well within range now, and in a few more minutes the fighting would be hand to hand.

Hornuff got up to his bowlder. Two of the women who had enlisted were posted there. One was a rancher's wife, wiry, gnarled, red faced. Hornuff knew her well: a woman who quoted Scripture, mended clothes, fed ten ranch hands, and played old-fashioned hymns upon a reed organ.

There she was with a smoking six-gun in her hand.

She was sitting behind the rock—not engaged in battle now. For something had happened to her companion. It was something that had transformed the gnarled ranch woman from a fighter to a sister of mercy and a quoter of Scripture.

Her companion was lying with head in her lap. She was a different mold. A big-boned girl with a pretty face. She was a cantina dance girl, and she was good at the six-gun under any ordinary circumstances. But now she had been hit.

She was the girl who several years before had inspired Plunk Reverdy to write that song:

> Her cheeks like ocatillo,
> Whose flowers are red in spring,
> But one thing else I'll tell yer, oh, Mr. Buckaroo,
> Like any cholla cactus, she'd stick you through and through!

Sheriff Hornuff saw that some bullet whizzing through the mesquite had found its mark. The cantina girl lay there in the merciful arms of that ranch woman. There was no gulf between them now. They were, it might be said, two heroic sisters.

Sheriff Hornuff proffered his flask. He appeared deliberate. Fighting was going on all along that line—the worst gun-fighting that had ever been seen or heard of in the Soda Mesa country. But Hornuff acted now as if the climax had passed.

"How long can we hold 'em, chief?" the ranch woman asked. "I want to git this gal home." She was crying hysterically over that poor girl in her arms. This thing that had happened had frightened her. She did not know that a whizzing bullet, leaving scarcely a mark, could work such havoc.

"Stay here a little while longer, ma'am," said Hornuff. "As I've heard you yourself put it wunst—'God's on our side.'"

The ranch woman uttered a prayer.

"How are you, gal?" he asked of the wounded one. "Kin you git a holt on yourself for a while longer? Plunk's gone down the cañon for to see Powderhorn—and he's taken the hoss-thief Powderhorn wants."

"I'll hold on all righto, chief," the cantina girl replied. "I want to see Plunk Reverdy once more and hear him play a fandango."

"You'll see him all right, gal," said Hornuff. "If I know anything about ole Powderhorn."

"Praise God! Praise Him all creatures here below!" murmured the ranch woman.

"Thank God for that banjo-playin' kid!" the cantina girl added.

Sheriff Hornuff crawled through the mesquite to the next bowlder. He crawled fast, because his sombrero band gripped his forehead with a sudden twitch, as a bullet cut two neat holes in the crown.

A red rock against which lead spattered and ricocheted took the old man under its wing.

One of the deputies was there, lying on his stomach with a right arm stretched stiffly over the ledge, a six-gun clutched in it, but silent.

The sheriff touched the fellow on the shoulder and there was a groan.

He held the flask to the man's lips.

"How's it goin', pard," Hornuff asked. "I see you're holdin' your own."

"I been servin' a round o' drinks out'n this six-gun every time I seen a flash, chief," the man replied weakly.

Hornuff recognized his voice. It was the barkeep from the Rex Cantina. The last Hornuff had seen of him, he was auctioning off that notorious banjo of Plunk Reverdy's.

"Didn't know I was hit," the barkeep was saying, "till you shook me. Give me another swig."

His finger regained its strength—and as if responding to an urge that had been forgotten for a space of time, the gun barked out, and kicked itself free from the weak hand.

"Don't fight any more, pard," the sheriff said. "You've done your work. It'll all be over soon, I reckon. One way or another. Plunk's gone to see Powderhorn—takin' with him the hoss-thief."

The man sank down as if the suspense of battle had been his only prop. He turned the sheriff's words over and over, then said weakly:

"I got to be goin' home, chief."

"I'll take you home, pard. But you wait here till the fightin's over. I've got to find Nell Brower. Then I'll come back and pack you home."

He turned to crawl into the mesquite again, but the barkeep put a hand upon his shoulder.

"Wait a minute, chief—"

Hornuff was surprised at the changed voice. "Can't you hold out, pard? Where are you hit?"

"You remember that banjo I was auctionin' off to them coots at the dance-hall?"

"Never mind that now. Where's your crease? Here in the side? Leave me see if I kin stop it a bit." The sheriff took his bandanna and yanked off his belt. It was pitch dark under the ledge, but he knew a thing or two about this business—even though he had to feel his way.

"If you only last till we git you back home, pard, they'll dress up this crease pronto—and you'll be all right."

"You offered three hundred—or somebody offered three hundred—for that banjo. Ain't I right?" The barkeeper had no response to this. "Is there any other bid? Anything above three thousand? Or three

hundred thousand? No use. I wouldn't sell it for the U. J. mine—not me!"

"There you are, pard. That'll keep you from losin' all your blood till we git you home."

"Not me, no, gents! I'm keepin' that banjo—till I git home. And till Plunk gits home. Been savin' up a speech for a long time, gents. Which I was goin' to deliver same to him. But I got to make up a new speech. It'll take me some time. Ain't much on speechifyin'.

"But I've got the main idea: When I'm dyin', Plunk, I want you to be at my bedside-a-playin' this banjo. And I want to hear that good, clean voice of yourn a-singin', 'Down at Old Pedro's Bar!'"

The sheriff crawled off in the darkness. Funny how a little thing like a bandanna handkerchief tightened on a wound with a belt, would worry him, when bullets were whizzing about his ears like hornets.

He found Nell Brower at the next bowlder.

What could he tell her?

Her lover had been brought back to her—saved by a mere quip of destiny from Powderhorn's malice. And now he had returned to the jaws of death.

But old Hornuff had a measure of understanding concerning this love of Nell Brower for Reverdy. Hornuff was no fool. He had been in love himself off and on in his youth. Perhaps not with the vehemence which characterized these two "children." Nevertheless he knew what it was. He had not fathered a whole range for so many years without sharing something of their emotions—of fear or courage or sorrow or love.

"I figure you and him won't have to part agin," he said.

"What do you mean by that, chief!" she exclaimed. She was no fool either. The sheriff was speaking cryptically. Death was all about them, whistling, cracking through mesquite, ripping up the adobe, and once in awhile in its trajectory through the dark, it struck home. But the girl was unscathed.

She could not fight, however, because she had no more ammunition.

Then they started talking about Plunk—who had already won his game. No matter if Powderhorn killed him, Plunk had won. The girl and Sheriff Hornuff both agreed on that point.

"You won't part agin," he repeated, "and I mean just what I say."

"No you don't. You mean something else. Is he dying? Did that horse-thief's cowardly shot—"

"No—that wound didn't git him. 'Twaren't anything to worry about. But—"

"All right, chief, tell me!" she said under her breath.

"Plunk—he went down to have another palaver with Powderhorn."

There was a long silence at this. Hornuff waited in darkness, his hand on hers.

Then she said: "If he gets killed, I'll—"

Of course, she would make some desperate vow.

He interrupted her. "If he gits killed, gal, why then we'll all git killed. There you are. It's what I mean. You won't be parted agin."

He waited, expecting to hear her sob when she tried again to speak. But there was no trace of breaking down in that cool, gentle voice:

"No," she said, "never again. Never!"

The ordinary dueling between Mule Town's far-flung line, and the forms creeping through the mesquite toward them, was broken by a sudden terrific fusillade.

"They've got that damn machine gun workin' agin," Hornuff said. "You stay here, gal. Too bad you ain't got a thirty-eight or I'd fix you up with a round or two. Stay here, anyways. Don't try to back away through the brush. You'll git hit sure. Tuck yourself in under this bowlder and wait—till he gits back."

"You think he'll—"

"Yes. They's a good chanst of his gettin' back. I know Powderhorn. He wants one man. He don't want Mule Town. He knows his tribes will be wiped out if he keeps this fool business up. Wait till Plunk gives him that man he wants. Which you'll see this smoke clear away—and the stars will start in blazin' agin. Besides Powderhorn's a hoss-trader. He prefers dickerin' to murderin'."

The sheriff left her.

Nell waited unarmed. That is to say unarmed with any finite power.

But there was an illimitable power in her prayer for Reverdy's life. It was like that rock the strength of which did not lessen with the slugs of lead chipping its edge.

Nell Brower knew it would be the same old red bowlder until the stars blazed again.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE TROJAN HORSE RIDES THROUGH.

CURIOSITY was the chief weakness of human nature which permitted the famous old Trojan Horse to get within the walls of the enemy.

Reverdy, taking the sacrificial, speckled-face horse of the Navahos through the enemy lines, succeeded because of this universal character trait.

A cloud of smoke from a burning calf-shed covered his advance. Then there appeared before the astonished braves a gaunt and wounded rider holding an arm aloft. By a hackamore he led a blindfolded horse—the very horse which some time before had been designated to bear the dead kinsman of John Powderhorn toward the "Path of Those Above."

And on this horse there was a burden—which worked violently upon the curiosity of those braves. They were about to fire and riddle with bullets the whole outfit—the two mounts and the burdens they carried.

Powderhorn was waiting, somewhat behind the line of active gunfire. He was seated upon a tree bole—a giant and morose figure with his headband of coyote tails, his grizzly claw necklace and his braided cord which symbolized that he had dreamed once upon a time, the Dream of the Jesako.

You might think that John Powderhorn had lulled himself to sleep with the metallic jinglers which he wore to stupify his enemies. He was immovable—as large as one of those bowlders, and as inscrutably silent.

He was not asleep. He was brooding. And he was tortured with thirst.

The effects of his peyote had worn off, leaving him consumed with the fires of hell, as well as of hate.

Now the peculiar thing about John Powderhorn—and perhaps an effect of the drug itself—was to leave him with an obsession. The fixed point about which his numbed mind slowly revolved was that funeral of his sister's son—the comrade who had followed him in many a raid, such as this; who had killed many paleface enemies; who had broken many wild stallions; who had brought home the skin of grizzly bear and puma and deer.

Now if Old John could lay his finger upon the dastard coyote who had caused that brave's death, he would be happy from that moment on. He would never ask a boon again of the Hot Hand or the Good Mind. And his beloved nephew could go on, avenged and free of this sad earth, and hunt bear or skin buffalo to his heart's content throughout eternity.

But what if, after killing all these palefaces, the murderer of his nephew was, by some freak of luck, not of their number? What actual proof would there be, that of those hundred and fifty white men, the real murderer was one? And without actual proof, what was the satisfaction?

The farther the braves crawled through the mesquite toward Mule Town, the more Old John's mind revolved around this point.

But what could he do? Nothing. He had made a threat, and he must carry it out. If not, any threat he made thereafter would be laughed at as the boast of a failing and aged man. No! A shaman had spoken. Let all the tribes of the world believe.

And now came that extraordinary outfit—two horses and two paleface enemies. They were brought by a dozen braves with a jingle of shoulder talismans, of rein chain, a clip-clop of hoofs, a soft pad of sage-brush shoes.

Old John asked what this claptrap meant. He wanted no prisoners. They were all to be killed.

But this man—the one with arm in sling—had a bargain to propose.

Old John was through with bargains.

But he had likewise a gift to bring to the big chief.

Old John licked his burning lips. He was thirsty. He reached for his canteen, but knowing the effects of water at this juncture, he forebore to drink. Instead he thrust his tongue out for the cooling air.

"Bring 'em paleface to this fire," he said.

The flame of a signal fire of mesquite roots gleamed upon Reverdy.

"Hootch la! Ees you!" he grunted. "Plum cultus paleface. You catch him my cayuse which is for the dead!"

"Here is your horse, big chief," Reverdy said. "I'm bringing him back to you. And with it, I'm giving you this saddle horse as a gift. Two for taking one. That's a good enough bargain?"

Old John's bright little eyes took in the fact that the saddle horse was a very good one. Two horses for one. Yes, that was a bargain that appealed to the horse trader. Old John was a warrior temporarily—and a shaman. But he was a horse trader first and last.

"All paleface of this town—we killem. You think to give me cayuse and buy life? Ees good joker!" He grunted to his warriors. "Killem this paleface dead. But keep the two cayuse.'"

"One thing else, chief—"

Old John was looking into the sky with his mottled tongue hanging out. "No more powwow," he said thickly.

"No powwow," Reverdy admitted. "It is all over. The battle. The palaver. The search. Your man is found—"

Powderhorn raised his hand. It was to stay the guns that were leveled upon Reverdy's breast and back.

"They tell me that before," said the big chief with a grunt. "I findem lie. Can paleface liars fool shaman who looks into the bodies of the sick and the bad?"

"They brought me to you," Reverdy said, feeling a great relief that the muzzles were lowered. "Very good. They lied. But not I. What lie have I told?"

John Powderhorn looked at him, with bloodshot eyes opening, with tongue lolling.

"What is this carcass like mule pack?" he asked, nodding to the prisoner.

The prisoner, petrified with fear, had dared say nothing until now. He gibbered for mercy, but not a man could understand him.

"He it was who murdered your nephew, big chief," said Reverdy.

The gleam of mesquite fire fell on the chief's great flat countenance. All semblance of human emotion seemed to have been erased from it. It was a vacuous stare—like the stare of a babe attempting to focus its gaze upon something yearned for.

In his own language he mumbled thickly that the bonds be removed from the prisoner.

Slink Bottiler, with red hair, damp and clinging to his misshapen skull, fell groveling upon the sand.

Old John could not understand the words of that hysterical plea, but he could very well understand the voice. It was the voice of guilt.

"Don't mak' lie to John Powderhorn!" the big chief warned. "John Powderhorn is shaman. He has swallow' the turtle bones which mak' him see heap sick carcass. I can see the worm in you. If you tellem lie, humph, good! I give you to my squaws. Which is too bad. You tellem truth, then John Powderhorn will show mercy."

One of the big chief's kinsmen came forward. It was one who had seen the murder committed. He explained that when asked to identify Reverdy, he had not been able to do so, for the distance was great, and he had seen only the murderer's back. But now he could swear that he remembered the man. It was this miserable thing on the sand, kneeling and whimpering with fear.

John continued his third degree—a process he always enjoyed.

"My kinsman said you are the man. Hi-yu-skookum. Very good."

This stopped the prisoner's whimpering. He felt his doom closing down irrevocably on his matted red head. He looked up beseechingly to the giant chief, then to the herald-priests, the swift runners with their buffalo horns and painted faces. He looked desparingly for help to everyone, standing in the gleam of that fire. And then he found one face which checked his fear and swerved it into another channel:

"Damn you, Reverdy, for a double-crossin' rat! You're the one as did this! You're the only one in the world as could of done this! You shook my hand as a pard, and then went agin me! You're a lyin', double-dealin', snivelin' rat, you are! So help me God, I'll ha'nt you for the rest of yer crawlin' life, I will, when I'm gone!"

John Powderhorn's face looked as if he had taken a refreshing drink. He smacked his lips. He grinned. He seemed to be hugely satisfied with what was going on.

"Look here, hombre," Reverdy said quickly. "He knows you're guilty. You confess to him and beg for mercy. Or else it means torture, do you hear?"

Slink Bottiler wrung his trembling knotted hands. He felt like a man half dead, surrounded by a ring of buzzards. He wanted an end put to it all. If he had had that Mexican machete he usually carried, there was no doubt but that he would have plunged it in his breast.

"Go on, kill me!" he screamed voicelessly. "I done it! I done it! There you are, damn you all! I done it, but have mercy on me! It was because I was bein' attackted.

"No, I wasn't rustlin' no hoss. Some Injuns sprung out on the chaparral and scairt me stiff! Who'd of done anything else, big chief? Can't yer see my way? I was a poor lonely mucker in Sody Mesa and I—"

Old John was tired of powwows and palavers. A blast of white fire came from his hand. Slink Bottiler received it full in the chest. He made a movement of his hand as if to beg Old John to wait until he had finished.

"You see, big chief—I thought the hoss was mine. Same kind of brand. But I was—"

His arms went forward, clutching the sand and he sank down, pillowing his cheek and breast there.

Old John turned his back upon the puny death. He ordered his braves to blanket the signal fire, and let it blaze, and smother it again with a wet blanket, according to their code.

The warriors riding the rim and firing into the cañon saw the signal, and in several groups they rode off into the night to their wickiups, their shacks, their night chant and their lodge at Desolation.

"Go back to your town, hombre," the big chief said to Reverdy. "You give me my man, good. You give me two cayuse', good! This one with gunnysack is plum' cultus. No good for dead man's mount. Buck like hell. Sell him bye'm bye to rodeo company for show bucker."

He mounted his own horse and called over his shoulder to Reverdy:

"Maybe sometime I drink from ha-ho-wuck with your sheriff, what you call him loving-cup. Not now. Can't drink something for two days. Heap fire in belly. Chew gum is good." He licked his lips. "Say good night to sheriff. Heap silly man. Why don' he give me what I ask for in first place?" He grunted. "Bye'm bye we smoke peace pipe. Old John stay peaceful hombre for while—maybe so."

The calf pens, brush corrals, bunkhouses, belched their final gasps of flame, leaving glowing skeletons of rafters, braces and uprights. These collapsed in a splendid whirl of sparks, then lay smoldering like a scattering of signal fires.

In that uneven light Goldpan Gulch and the Bowlder Wash was a confusion of horses wheeling off, of the wounded, lifted up and helped to saddles, of women in bright calico dresses and grim men in tall peaked sombreros taking the many trails through bowlder and sage and thorn.

Toward the desert into which Goldpan Gulch opened, slinking forms were swallowed in the darkness of the arroyos and the Desolation trail.

The smoke of the conflict cleared from the cañon.

High above in the ribbon of sky between the cliffs you could see the steady gleam of planets, and the growing brilliance of the Big Bear.

Reverdy found her where Sheriff Hornuff had told her to wait, near a great bowlder in the dry creek-bed.

It was a magnificent rock upon which the machine gun had spattered its futile lead.

She did not see him until he loomed up

before her in the starlight, waist deep in sage. Then she got to her knees, and opened her arms to him.

Reverdy staggered forward. He was spent with the gruelling of the last hour—the past days—his contest at Desolation with the demon-horse, his fight with Bottiler, his wound, the nerve-twisting strain of that palaver with old John Powderhorn.

And he was spent in soul as well as in body. For days he had been flayed by the glances of every fellow man. Those wounds could not heal in one half hour except by a miracle. And the miracle had happened.

He leaned against the bowlder to support his weight. Then her voice came to him and he saw her hands reaching out in the starlight.

"We're all at your feet," she said, weeping. "We're all kneeling. You've got the whole world here before you! Your name is a name which no one will ever forget!"

"The world? What of that! It was for your sake, girl, that I cared about that name—because I want you to bear it."

"You are giving me the most precious gift ever offered to a woman," she said. "It is worth more than the whole world."

He fell forward in a soul-satisfying surrender of will and strength.

He was on his knees before her, sinking as she took him in her arms.

THE END

Now that you have read "The Starlit Trail" we would be glad to have you write us your idea of the movie star best suited to play Plunk Reverdy for the screen. Previous serials in ARGOSY-ALLSTORY by Kenneth Perkins to be filmed are "The Beloved Brute" and "The Gun Fanner," the latter starring Tom Mix and known as "Romance Land."—THE EDITOR.

STOKERS

AS we toil an' sweat where th' boilers fret,
There's nobody gives a damn
For us guys below in th' furnace glow,
Where th' fire doors sway an' slam;
We're a roughneck crew with our tasks to do,
An' we're tortured with mad desires,
But we flout th' flame an' we play th' game,
As we bend to th' hellish fires.

We're sons of sin, so we curse an' grin
Like imps in th' pits of hell,
While we shovel th' coals an' th' good ship rolls
Along through th' greasy swell;
While we blister an' bake, while our muscles ache,
While we hark to th' turbines' singin',
We laugh at th' sea an' we dream of th' spree
Th' voyage's end is bringin'.

We're smoke-smudged blokes, an' th' clean good folks
On th' decks give us no heed;
They stand an' stare, when we take th' air,
For it seems they're another breed;
Though our hands are tough, though our talk is rough,
Though we are not made for showin',
We give them th' laugh, for we stand th' gaff,
As we keep th' old tub a goin'.

Edgar Daniel Kramer.

No Social Background

By GORDON STILES

THE arrival in Summerton of Archibald Willets was accompanied by no sounding of trumpets—it's an open question whether *anybody* was ever welcomed, *anywhere,* by the "sounding of trumpets," but it's a nice expression—nor by any other demonstration. He just stepped off the train as any other traveler would have done and inquired of the baggage master if there was a good hotel near —not too expensive.

And the baggage master had directed him to the Binyon House because that was the only institution in Summerton which could rightfully be called a hotel. Mr. Willets thanked his informant, said he would send for his trunk next day and walked off in the direction indicated, carrying a traveling bag in either hand.

The baggage master looked after him and murmured to himself: "There's a damn good looking chap. Pretty snappy goods, some of these salesmen." Then he forgot all about Archibald Willets.

There is no doubt about the first part of the above comment. Archie Willets was handsome enough to make people look twice and to provoke similar remarks wherever he went. His six feet of well-knit frame, his thick reddish-brown hair, his square jaw and merry blue eyes formed a combination that might turn any girl's head and stir envy in the breasts of less favored males.

But to those with whom the young man came in contact next morning it soon became clear that he was no salesman.

First, he had walked the length of Main Street, looking into shop windows, observing the people on the sidewalks and watching the motor traffic between the curbs. After that he had widened his sphere of operations and traversed the West Park section where dwelt Summerton's oldest and most conscious families.

He had noted the dignified old residences and the smart new ones, viewed with approval the broad, well-kept lawns and the general air of thrift and prosperity.

Following this inspection, he had betaken himself to the meaner district, if Summerton could be said to have a " meaner " district. At any rate, Mr. Willets had prowled long in the neighborhood where the silk mills and the shoe factory and the malleable iron works grumbled and smoked and flared; he had turned an appraising eye upon the hundreds of workers who burst from the several gates at the discordant hoots of twelve o'clock sirens.

Pretty well conditioned crowd, he thought and trailed along through the streets where these people dwelt.

Returning to the Binyon House, Archie held protracted converse with the head clerk whom he found most affable, albeit a trifle curious. The salient points of Mr. Willets's gleanings were that Summerton had a population of some twelve thousand five hundred, that it was as live a burg as could be found in the State of Michigan, that the Graydons and the Bishops and the Overtons ran the town and that business was fine.

" You're selling something, I suppose," remarked the clerk.

" No," returned Archie, " at least not yet. I'm thinking of locating here."

The clerk proved that he was a sophisticated person by stifling his surprise, but he said: " Going into some line of business?"

" I expect so."

After waiting in vain for Archie to elaborate, the curious one inquired: " Hail from Chicago, I suppose?"

" I've been in Chicago, but I've lived in so many places that it's hard to say just where I do hail from."

With which the hotel man was forced to content himself.

But later in the day, that gentleman observed to the reporter who covered the Binyon House for the *Evening Blade* that Mr. Willets looked like a live wire and that he must have made a careful study of the town because of the knowledge he had picked up in regard to various sections, as evidenced by his conversation of the afternoon. Which moved the reporter to seek out Mr. Willets.

" I understand you intend to go into business here," opened the young man of the press. " And I thought you wouldn't mind giving me an outline of your plans and perhaps a photograph of yourself."

Archie laughed. So did the reporter, though he couldn't have told why. Folks had a way of doing that with Archie Willets.

" I don't think the people who read your paper would get any kick out of reading about me," said Archie. " And I wouldn't have my picture printed in a newspaper for any money."

The reporter laughed, as reporters always do at self-deprecating statements, and was just a little more urgent. So that, finally, Archie said: " No. Really. Not yet. I'm not sure what I am going to do. I'll let you know if I start a new department store or anything like that."

But somehow, the newspaper man left with the feeling that the newcomer was a " good scout " and probably a lot more important than he appeared to be. He must keep an eye on Mr. Willets.

II.

THE following morning Archie Willets might have been seen gazing speculatively at a sign in a window toward that end of Main Street which was nearest West Park. The sign read:

PART OF STORE TO LET
Inquire Within

Previous to his perusal of said placard, Mr. Willets had walked the length of the thoroughfare twice, taking in the various business establishments with an appraising eye. And now, as he stood before the window in question he had the air of one who is settling something in his mind.

Presently he stepped through the doorway and addressed the stoop-shouldered man behind the counter:

" Boss in?"

" I'm the boss—and the whole show, too," replied the other.

" That's good. Saves time for me. How

much do you want for part of your store and how much goes for the money?"

"Who wants to rent it?"

"I do."

"Oh. Well, I don't care how much you take as long as you leave me room to shelve what you see. I'm going out of business as soon as my lease expires next year. Phonographs and records are a drug on the market since this radio thing came along. I'm sick."

"It's tough luck, all right," quoth Archie and looked so genuinely sorry that tears sprang to the eyes of the stoop-shouldered man and his voice was husky as he agreed: "You bet it is—after twenty years in business. I wasn't quick enough to grab the radio trade; didn't realize what it meant to me. Who are you and what do you want the place for?"

"My name is Archibald Willets and I want the place to make doughnuts in."

"Make doughnuts in?" repeated the other.

"Just so. Doughnuts. Round things with holes in 'em. Surely you've seen doughnuts even if you haven't eaten 'em." The twinkle in Archie's eye brought a faint smile to the lips of the other.

"It just struck me as kind of funny—you wanting to make doughnuts."

"Say," resumed Archie, "I can make the best doughnuts you or any one you know ever set teeth in."

"Make 'em yourself?"

"With my own honest and toil-worn hands. Learned how from my grandmother and she won every prize in six counties with hers!"

"You won't get fat making doughnuts in this town. These people are the hard-boiled descendants of the hard-boiled pioneers who 'schooned' their way out here and fit Indians and all that. The families just squatted down and waited for the bushes to grow into trees and then when the trees were big enough they cut 'em down, sold 'em for pots and pots of money and built factories. Now they're oppressors of the working classes and respectable. But they never let go of anything they got hold of and every household has its own 'receipt' for doughnuts. Why, they think it's wicked and wasteful to buy bread at the baker's when it can be made at home."

To this long speech Archie made reply: "Perhaps you're right. But that's my lookout. I might sell my goods to the oppressed instead of the oppressors. Who knows?"

"You might. After all, it's your own lookout, as you say. Have you got any references?"

"No. Except this." The young man tendered a check for four hundred odd dollars—a bonus check. "Outside this present from Uncle Sam, awarded me for meritorious conduct in the late European argument, I have two hundred dollars in cash. That's what I begin life again with—at twenty-six! How much did you say I would have to pay for a place to start my doughnut foundry?"

"I'll put in a partition and fix up a separate entrance and let you have the space for fifty dollars a month. How's that?"

"Done! When can you have it ready? Yesterday?"

"You *are* in a rush, aren't you?"

"I am. Every day lost makes me poorer."

"All right. Two days; possibly three."

"Good enough. I'll pay three months' rent in advance, if that'll suit you."

"Suits me perfectly," said the stoop-shouldered man, with alacrity.

Archie passed over one hundred and fifty dollars in cash, took a receipt, shook hands and stepped off toward the Binyon House, leaving his new landlord fingering the money and gazing after the young man with a slightly dazed expression on his countenance.

III.

THE sign on the window was somewhat modest, lettered in small block capitals:

SUMMERTON DOUGHNUT KITCHEN

Within, hot fat seethed in a twenty gallon caldron while an electrically operated mixing machine, running in full view of the street, kneaded huge masses of rich, cream-colored dough. In the rear of the shop, Archie Willets, white coated and immaculate, worked like a beaver at the cutting

board; at intervals he carried enameled trays laden with his handiwork to the caldron and with a flat implement something like a putty knife, slid the disks one after another into the boiling depths.

To the process of inspecting and turning he brought more seriousness than one would expect was in him. Which was justified when the golden brown results were turned out on the enameled tray-top table—fluffy and fragrant and appetizing.

And it was indeed a hardy soul who could witness the completion of a fresh batch without slipping in and mounting one of the stools at the long narrow counter and sampling the wares of the new establishment.

Archie had not reckoned on much counter trade in the beginning. But he had planned what to do with his output. Toward the middle of the afternoon of the first day, he turned out the gas under the caldron, shut off the mixer and busied himself putting doughnuts into bags—four to a bag.

These eventually found their way into two great hampers and along about four o'clock, the adventurer closed up shop and sallied forth, a basket on each arm. To the inquisitive and amused looks turned upon him he paid no heed and shaped his course for West Park.

For two hours he went from house to house leaving at each place one of the bags on which was printed the following note:

> The best doughnuts in the world are made in the Summerton Doughnut Kitchen. These are samples of our product.
>
> Call, or telephone City 1650. Delivery will be made every afternoon between four and six. ARCHIBALD WILLETS.

That evening the *Blade* reporter, Sam Wentworth, put in an appearance just as Archie was emerging from the shop after leaving the empty hampers.

"So you didn't decide on a department store, after all," he said.

"No," grinned Archie, "not with six hundred and fifty dollars. I may do something of the kind with my profits at the end of a year."

"Seen the paper?"

"No."

"Gave you a little free boost." He held out a copy of the sheet.

Archie read:

SUMMERTON HAS DOUGHNUT KING

Archibald Willets, who claims to be the premier doughnut artist of the universe, has decided to bestow his talents upon Summerton.

To that end he has rented quarters at 179 Main Street, where he has installed the latest type "sinker" machinery and is prepared to "turn 'em out" by the thousand. If Mr. Willets's plans succeed, the fad of doughnut consumption will soon outrival the crossword puzzle craze. "*Doughnuts, doughnuts,* and *more doughnuts*" is his motto.

"The doughnut king," said Archie when he had finished. "That's good. That's all right. Much obliged, sir."

"How about a photograph of yourself standing in front of the shop in full doughnut-building regalia?"

Archie held up his hand "No, no, no! No pictures. I'm too damned handsome."

"So you are, too. Damn you!" was Wentworth's parting shot.

Thus was Summerton's new industry launched.

IV.

CERTAINLY it appeared to such of Summerton's populace as observed Mr. Willet's activities that the new venture was prospering. Orders poured in and Archie rushed about with his hampers; the five counter stools were occupied practically all day.

And still the young proprietor played a lone hand. It was hard work, no doubt of that. But Archie seemed to thrive on it.

At the end of four months, however, the hampers were replaced by a motorcycle with a delivery box and this accelerated matters besides saving "The Doughnut King" as he was commonly called, a lot of footwork. And, since the quality of the product remained up to the original standard, there appeared to be no reason why the business should not grow to really large proportions. That was the talk about town, anyhow.

As for the personal doings of Archie Willets, nobody could have told much about them. He had rented a couple of rooms

over a business establishment in Main Street and presumably he spent most of his leisure there. Occasionally he would drop in and chat with the clerk at the Binyon House, but that apparently was the extent of his social activities.

But of course such a state of affairs could not go on forever. When you drop such a perfect specimen of manhood into a town the size of Summerton, sooner or later he is going to slip into some niche or other. It's as natural as breathing.

In the case of Archie Willets, the adjustment was slower in arriving because he had come to the place, an utter stranger, with no one to introduce him and take him about. And running a doughnut shop, even if it was the only one in town, could not be regarded as a social asset.

To be sure, the daughters of the "real people" had seen Archie and, perforce, admired him. On certain occasions he had been engaged in conversation by one or another of these damsels and it is likely that there were sighs because this striking young man did not "belong." But as for making social overtures to a tradesman who was his own errand boy—well, it just couldn't be done. Anybody would know that!

When something did happen, it was Martha Graydon who started it. And when Martha, or Sally Bishop or Eloise Overton started anything in Summerton, it went! Among these three there could be no snobbery. Each of the three daddies was rated at over one million dollars with first grade credit. What one of the girls did the others were forced to accept.

Therefore, when Martha dropped in at Sally's house one winter afternoon and found Eloise there, she had an appreciative audience when she sprang her surprise.

"What do you think I've found out?" began Martha excitedly.

"You mean, 'Who do you think I've found out?', don't you?" laughed Sally.

"No. Pay attention, folks. This town is harboring a genius and doesn't know it."

"A genius! That's one of the things you get by rubbing lamps or something, isn't it?" put in Eloise.

"No, honestly, I'm serious. Do you know—I mean, of course you've seen that young chap they call the doughnut king. The one who brings the world's finest doughnuts."

The others tried to look as if they were struggling to recall the person in question. Their efforts to conceal their excitement which both felt were quite creditable.

Oh, yes. Why sure! They'd seen him any number of times. Sally admitted having passed a few words with him once when she chanced to be in the kitchen when he came. She did not add that she had hurried down there when his side-car effect entered the drive.

"Well," continued Martha, "I went into the shop this noon to order some doughnuts and what do you think I found him doing?"

"Tell us. This isn't a guessing contest! Playing a saxophone, most likely."

"Writing poetry!" exploded Martha.

And the echo came twofold, "Writing poetry!"

"Yes. He was. He was alone, for a wonder; the place seems always full. And he tried to shove what he was doing aside so I wouldn't see it. But I caught a line and it made me curious. So I pestered him to tell me what it was all about.

"He didn't want to. But I didn't let up on him till he did. In the end, he showed me some things he'd done and, let me tell you, they're good! He says he writes just for the fun of it and he wouldn't let me take any of it away. But I'm sure he has a talent that ought to be encouraged."

There was a silence—as if each of the three was occupied with the same thought. Finally Eloise said: "How do you plan to encourage it?"

"I'm trying to think. Of course nobody knows anything about him. And it is probable that he has no social background whatever. But he talks quite well and—what do you think about it?"

With rare generalship, Sally said quickly: "Do? I'll tell you what *I'm* going to do. I'm going to ask him out here next time I see him. I'll lead up to it in such a way that he'll think it's just a friendly and hospitable act."

Martha darted a poisonous look at her friend. "You're not! Really!"

"I certainly am," returned Sally composedly. "Don't act surprised. Both of you would have done it if I hadn't beaten you to it. You know that."

"Look here, Sally Bishop," cut in Eloise, "if you have this Adonis out here, you've got to let Martha and me sit in. Martha found him in the first place, and I claim a sharé through sheer nerve. That boy is the best-looking thing I ever saw."

"All right," agreed Sally.

V.

Those who know their Summertons will not find it difficult to picture the situation that arose following the above conversation. Even in places much larger than Summerton there is plenty of appreciation for a young and presentable male. And in this case where the male was more than presentable, a genius to boot—well, there you are.

In the space of a few months Archie Willets found himself elevated from the position of a poor doughnut maker to something akin to lionship. And among the best families of Summerton, at that.

Fortunately for him, he did possess a certain amount of literary ability—far more than anybody else in town, although Sam Wentworth would not have admitted it. And when, in the course of his rapid progress, he turned those blue eyes of his upon a female under sixty, said female was stirred!

The girls collectively forced him to send some of his work to the *Blade*, where it was printed with a flattering caption which hinted that the new genius, unearthed in Summerton, would one day make himself felt in the world of letters.

Archie took it all with becoming grace. Showed frankly that he was pleased, but appeared to maintain his equilibrium. While he was now accepted everywhere, those who entertained him were forced to admit that they knew absolutely nothing about his antecedents. Efforts to draw him out on that subject were always deftly foiled.

So that it came to be a generally accepted conclusion that he came from obscure beginnings and was not particularly proud of it. He had worked his way up by his own efforts, most likely, and there was no use in forcing him to supply details for the merely curious.

Still, after a bit, it looked as if something aside from curiosity might stir at least one solid citizen to action which would have as its motive the unveiling of young Willets's past. Due to the obvious fact that Archie's attentions had come to be divided, romantically speaking, between Martha Graydon and Sally Bishop.

In both families some serious parental discussions had taken place. Girls of today are inclined to be headstrong—to rely less upon others—especially parents—for guidance in what they regard as purely personal matters.

A disinterested onlooker would have gambled that Archie Willets could have married either of the girls, but none of the onlookers was disinterested, and the almost open rivalry between the two was watched with eager interest.

VI.

On a certain June morning, however, such matters as love affairs were shoved into the background by a startling bit of news. The savings bank of Bairdville had been entered during the night by a burglar who had slugged the watchman from behind, blown the safe, and escaped with eighty thousand dollars.

When the watchman came to, he stated that he believed the robbery to have been accomplished by a lone bandit, because he had heard but one set of footsteps when he was rushed. Detectives reported that the job had been done by a clever professional, undoubtedly.

For ten days the crime was almost the sole topic of conversation both in Bairdville and in Summerton, twenty-five miles away. Archie Willets took a keen interest in the affair, offered conjectures and advanced theories with the rest. Especially he enjoyed discussing it with his friend, Sam Wentworth, who, being a newspaper man, was close to the "heart of things."

But since the officers of the law seemed completely outwitted and did not even arrest anybody on suspicion, the furor gradually died down and events moved along much as before. The doughnut business thrived more than ever, as evidenced in the purchase by Mr. Willets of a new motor car which he used for delivery purposes as well as pleasure. He talked, too, of employing an assistant.

It was two days after Archie bought the car that Martha Graydon rang him up with an invitation to dinner. Further, she aroused his curiosity by remarking that there would be no other guests and that she particularly wanted to chat with him alone.

Yet, when they sat together in the darkness of the vine-hung porch, she did not come at once to the point. Archie wondered why she had stressed her desire for a tête-à-tête talk, and finally asked:

"Why did you want to see me alone?"

She hesitated. Suddenly he felt her hand steal into his palm, and he thought it trembled a little. When she did speak, it was in an emotional whisper. She said:

"I don't know. Yes, I do. I—I—thought you might be interested to know that—Oh, do you remember having a tire puncture on your motorcycle recently?"

"About three weeks ago," answered Archie promptly.

"It was right about here, wasn't it?"

"I believe it was. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Only I saw you fixing it. I wondered why you were out at four o'clock in the morning. You don't often ride at that time, do you?"

"Yes. Quite often. It's much nicer at that hour."

"Oh! Do you know I've shuddered since, when I think of what might have happened to you that night. If you remember, it was the night of the bank robbery, and you were coming in from the Bairdville road. Suppose you had run into the burglar or burglars?"

"Ugh!" shivered Archie, with something very like mock alarm.

There was a long silence; her fingers gripped his and held fast.

"It's just as well that the police didn't know about it; they might have questioned you—asked if you had seen anybody on the road. And you wouldn't want to be mixed up in that mess, would you?"

"I should say not! I'm glad you didn't mention it to anybody."

Her arm pressed close against his. "I wouldn't for the world. I'd do anything rather than get you into trouble, Archie!"

"It's sweet of you to say that," he said.

"Oh, Archie!" Her head fell against his shoulder. "If you only knew—if you—oh, I don't know what I'm saying."

"There, there," he patted her cheek, found traces of tears, then relapsed into silence. To him she seemed to be waiting for him to go on. But he could think of nothing that seemed to fit the situation.

At last Martha sighed—a long, deep sigh.

Archie said: "It's late, and I'd better trot along."

When he said good night her hand lingered in his and her face was grave in the half light from the hall.

"Shall I see you soon again—very soon?" she asked.

He said, "I hope so," and went away.

VII.

For the second time within a month Summerton had a sensation. An elopement—no less! Sally Bishop and Archie Willets had run away together. In a wire sent from Bairdville, Sally announced that they had been married there and were off on their honeymoon. She did not say where they were going, but promised to write.

When the news came to Martha Graydon, her mother, who told her, thought the girl was going to faint. Instead, she seemed to take a grip on herself and marched off to her room.

There she paced up and down. If she had ever felt tenderness for Archie Willets, there was no trace of it in her face now.

"The cad! The miserable rat!" she murmured between set teeth as she roved about the chamber. Then, "I'll do it! I will!" and became all action.

First she telephoned Sam Wentworth.

"I want to see you at once, Sam. It's very important. All right. You'll be right along. No, not here; I'll meet you by the monument. Ten minutes, then. Good."

She found him waiting and opened her subject without preliminary.

"Sam, I want your advice about something."

"Shoot."

"Nobody in this town knows anything at all about Archie Willets. He has been as close as an oyster about himself. Did you ever wonder why?"

"I suppose I have. What of it?"

"Listen, then. On the night the Bairdville bank was robbed I got up to take some cough medicine at four o'clock, and almost in front of the house I saw Archie Willets fixing a puncture in his motorcycle tire. I saw his face quite plainly in the light of the lamp. Now, what could he be doing at that hour, *on the road from Bairdville?*"

"Good Lord!" began Sam.

Martha interrupted. "Right after that he bought a new car. Do you think the doughnut business is as good as all that?"

"Whew!" whistled Sam. "By George, I believe you've hit something, Martha! Twice he has refused absolutely to have his picture taken. And—say! You haven't told any one, have you?"

"Not a soul."

"Fine. I'm on my way back to the beat of my life. And you're going to be in on it. Hop in and we'll run over to Bairdville and put the cops on to this wise baby—this doughnut king! Ha! 'Doughnut King Also Deals in Soup!' Some headlines! Oh, baby! I'll get this yarn all sewed up before the other papers have a hint of it! Off we go!"

The arm of the law moved swiftly. Only a few hours later the chief of police in Bairdville nodded with satisfaction at a wire from the Detroit detective bureau. The car bearing Mr. and Mrs. Archibald Willets had been apprehended as per request and the pair were now at police headquarters. After sending a message to the effect that he was on his way, the chief sped off to Detroit, accompanied by Sam Wentworth, who already had telephoned his paper some of the salient points of his self-assumed assignment.

VIII.

"*Howdy, chief,*" *greeted the head of the* detective bureau, as the Bairdville lynx strode into headquarters at Detroit.

"Fine. Good job you pulled off, all right."

"I'm not so dog-goned sure about that," said the other.

"Why not? Where is the young bucko?"

"He and his bride are in one of the offices—guarded, of course. But I hesitated about locking him up after I questioned him. Come and have a look at the record. I've wired for confirmation."

The chief studied the paper:

Q. Name, please?

A. Archibald Willets.

Q. Residence?

A. No. 5432 Park Avenue, New York City.

Q. Business?

A. I'm the Doughnut King of Summerton. I write a little, too.

Q. Father's name?

A. George Alfred Willets.

Q. What?

A. George Alfred Willets, of Willets, Griscom & Co., New York.

Q. Say, what are you trying to do—kid me?

A. Check me up and see.

Q. You mean to say your father is Willets, the New York banker?

A. Well, I'm his son.

Q. What you doing in the doughnut business, then?

A. Why shouldn't I be in the doughnut business—or any other business I want to be in? If you want to know, I went into it for the fun of the thing. I thought I might get a good story, too. I do quite a lot of magazine work. It's hard to get a kick out of anything since the war, so I thought I'd do something out of the ordinary. I can make the best doughnuts in the world.

The chief stopped at this point, mopped his perspiring brow.

"Say!" he exclaimed. "Do you think this stuff is the goods?"

"I kinda got a hunch it is. I've wired description, and we oughta hear from New York any time. Here it comes now, I guess. Here's two wires."

He ripped open the first message, scanned it, and passed it over to the man from Bairdville:

> Better turn your prisoner loose. Description fits him. I know him personally. Don't be surprised at anything he does. Always up to something. Advise drop him before old man gets wise. That bird would tear the sky down.

The signature was that of a well-known New York police inspector.

"Gosh! Let him out, quick! We got no real evidence against him."

"Right! Here, wait a minute. Your men—three of them—have been rounded up in Chicago. See." He held out the second message. "Got the goods on 'em, too."

The chief used his handkerchief again. "Golly! I'd better go in and apologize right away, I guess."

"I reckon you had," agreed the other.

As they sat over their first dinner as man and wife, Sally said:

"Why on earth did you ever do it, Archie?"

"I don't know. Why did I spend eight months sheep herding in Australia? Or three months as a 'hand' on a Gloucester fishing schooner? Or— Oh, how do I know?"

Sally giggled. "The Doughnut King!" she said.

Archie chuckled. "My Doughnut Queen!" he answered.

THE END

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DISENCHANTMENT

BRIGHT were the days in Arizona,
Cloudless, skies of turquoise blue,
And the nights were meant for living
In a moonlit place with you.

Time there was when 'neath the olives
I glimpsed heaven through your hair,
Caught the breath of oleanders,
Dared to dream that you might care.

There was magic in blue mountains
Etched against a flaming sky,
And the nodding palms at sunset
Whispered love could never die.

Lulled to dreams on wine of lotus,
Sure that nothing mattered more,
In my mind I built a cottage,
Blood red roses round its door.

Days are heartache, nights are longing,
Now the subtle magic's fled—
Now I hate long days of sunshine,
Lovers' moons that mock the dead.

H. A. Woodbury, Jr.

A Comedy of Terrors

By ERIC HOWARD

THE great tent was crowded to capacity. Every bench was occupied. Jerry Bishop, manager of the Bishop Players, peeped at the audience from the stage, and grinningly calculated his profits. It was Saturday night, the last of their successful week in Sonora; and to-night's audience was the largest of the week.

"Fifteen hundred in the house!" said Jerry. "At fifty cents a throw that's seven hundred and fifty! Gosh! A few more weeks like this and I can buy that orange grove in California and loaf all winter, instead of playing bits in the movies."

Jerry retreated back stage, where the other members of the company were hastily preparing for the second act. The first had got over very well. The play was a comedy of somewhat ancient vintage, but new to the residents of Sonora. They had laughed heartily at the lines that were, to be kind, ten years old. But even the most bewhiskered anecdote is new to one who has never heard it.

Sonora saw few plays. There were two movie shows in town, and once in a long while a cheap burlesque troupe played for a night or two in the Odd Fellows' Hall. But the Bishop Players were, to put it in a word—and that word Jerry's—Class!

They traveled in large, bright, inclosed six and eight-cylinder cars. They wore clothes seldom seen off Fifth Avenue or Hollywood Boulevard.

How those cars and those clothes were purchased, on how long deferred payments, is another story. Suffice it that they had the cars and the clothes. Possession is ninth-tenths of the law; and, as another epigrammatist remarked, nothing succeeds like success.

The Bishop Players fairly shouted suc-

cess. When those great silent cars rolled into town, with "The Bishop Players" painted in bright gold on their sides, traffic stopped. The curbs were lined as if it was a circus parade.

And Jerry Bishop, very distinguished in his high hat and morning coat, would bow and smile; and little Jane Bishop, the leading lady, would throw kisses to the crowd; and Johnny Forbes, the comedian of the company, would display his choicest antics.

Days before, the advance man had come to town, hiring small boys to put up bills on every telephone pole, in every shop window, arranging for advertisements in the newspapers, superintending the erection of the tent—which was shipped in a special car, by railroad, with a gang of ten men whom Jerry genially called the "bohunks."

The tent went up on Sunday, erected to the accompaniment of the bohunks' cursing as they were assisted by town loafers. The show opened on Monday evening.

A different play was performed each night, with vaudeville stunts between the acts, and on Saturday, after their week's run, the Bishop Players moved on to another town, one day's drive distant, not to return until next year.

For six years, from May to September, the Bishop Players had toured the Southwest, spending a week in each town of more than three thousand inhabitants—there aren't very many of that size—and now they were so well established that as soon as it became rumored that they were coming, everybody got ready to welcome them. Everybody liked them, except the owners of the local movie theaters, whose business they assassinated for a week.

They had started in flivvers, and they had not had a tent the first year. They had played in any available hall, seldom to large crowds, the great tent and the silent cars had come later; Jerry was a better promoter than he was an actor.

As Jerry walked back stage, taking in at a glance the preparations for the second act, he saw that Jane, the leading lady, and Johnny Forbes, who was as funny off as on the stage, were talking to "that darn kid" again.

It annoyed Jerry, for several reasons. In the first place, he didn't like "that darn kid," otherwise known as Billy Wyatt, although he had been unable, thus far, to think up a reason for not liking him. Johnny Forbes liked him; that was easily seen. And Jane—that was the real reason Jerry didn't like Billy—because Jane did.

Although Jane bore the name of Bishop and was supposed to be Jerry's sister, she was neither a Bishop nor his sister. Mrs. Jerry Bishop had grown too plump for leading parts, due to the comparative wealth that had rolled in upon them, and a younger, slimmer leading lady had to be found. They had found Jane.

And Jane, starving as an extra girl in Hollywood, had leaped at the chance of joining the company. She had even agreed to drop her previously selected stage name and to become a Bishop, which was a great sacrifice, especially when you know that the name she had selected for herself—to replace the humble Brown of her birth—was Janvier. Jane Janvier!

In electric lights, thought Jane, that would knock 'em cold! She had contemplated making the Jane "Jeanne," but hadn't the courage to go that far. Somebody might ask her to converse in French.

Jerry Bishop could not afford to lose Jane. She and Johnny Forbes, who could play anything, were the stars of his troupe, with himself, of course, playing the leading masculine rôles. He knew how good they were, and, if Jane didn't quite realize that she was indispensable, Johnny Forbes did. Leave it to Johnny!

"Now, kid, don't get cold feet," he was saying to "that darn kid." "You'll be on only a few minutes, with Jane and me there to give you courage. Nobody else on the stage except Percy Boynton. You're not going to let him give you the heebee-jeebees, are you?"

"Gosh, I feel funny!" said Billy Wyatt. "I got through the rehearsal all right, but I'm afraid of that crowd out there. Some of 'em know me, and they'll give me the razz."

"If they do, just stop for a minute and make a low bow, like you were acknowledging their applause. That always fixes 'em. Then go on with your lines."

"But suppose I forget my lines?"

"Oh, Billy!" laughed Jane. "You won't! I know you won't! And if you do, Johnny and I will prompt you! Won't we, Johnny?"

"Sure," nodded the comedian, who wore the make-up and costume of a butler. "Why, once when I was with John Drew he forgot everything and couldn't get my prompt words. The two of us were on alone. I had to carry the whole scene, and I did. Impromptu stuff! Go ahead and forget, if you feel like it. We'll pull you through. Jane and I can make up a whole show, before any audience, and it'll be a good one, won't it?"

"I'll inform the planet!" agreed Jane.

"But Percy will be there too!" objected Billy Wyatt. "He'll laugh at me!"

"If he does," said Johnny Forbes, "you walk right over and punch his jaw. Knock him out! Jane and I will even cover that for you, and the rubes out front will think the author made it up! Won't we, Jane?"

"I'll inform the planet!" Jane agreed, more enthusiastically than before. "I'd love that!"

"That's how you stand with us, kid!" The comedian slapped Billy Wyatt on the back. "Now do your worst, and we'll save you. All you need in this actor business is nerve, and then some more nerve."

Jerry Bishop had overheard a good deal of what was said. Now, with a serious frown, he advanced.

"What's the trouble?" he demanded.

"Eddie Booth here has a case of stage fright, captain," Forbes informed him.

"Well, Wyatt, you're supposed to know your lines!" snapped Bishop. "you know I didn't want to give you, an inexperienced kid, a chance in the show. But now that you've got it, I expect you to know your lines."

"I do know them, Mr. Bishop," responded young Wyatt, miserably. "I think I know them too well—they're all buzzing round in my head, like a cross-word puzzle."

Jerry began another lecture, but Forbes cut him short.

"Let him alone, Jerry," he told the manager. "Only good actors ever get stage-fright. This bunch of hams doesn't know what it is, but all the big boys do. Leave the kid to me and I'll see that he gets through all right. He's only got one speech."

"It's such a long one, though!" wailed Billy Wyatt.

"The longer, the easier!" Forbes reassured him. "Once you get started, the lines will come right out. Have no fear, for I have spoken."

Billy grinned feebly, but he was not reassured. Even looking into Jane's eyes did not accomplish that miracle.

The fact was, as he told himself, he was scared stiff. He felt like running away and hiding, and he would have run away, if his sense of obligation to Forbes had not been so great. Or if he had not been ashamed to run, with Jane there.

Billy, as is probably perfectly clear by now, was not an actor. He had never before been upon the stage. And yet, within a very few minutes, the curtain would rise, the second act would begin, and then, at a certain cue, he was expected to walk out of the darkness into the light, before that terrible audience, and speak in a voice that could be heard in every corner of the tent.

What was he supposed to say? Gosh, what were those words? Oh, Lord! Had he forgotten them, after memorizing them over and over? No, now he had them! Yes! For the ninetieth time he mumbled them under his breath.

Billy was terror-stricken.

The curtain went up. Johnny and Jane and Percy Boynton—supercilious Percy—were on the stage. Billy heard his cue. Some one pushed him forward. He stumbled into the glare that came from the footlights.

He was supposed to enter speaking, but he stood tongue-tied and helpless, his mouth open, gaping at Jane.

"Why, here's the young master now," he heard Johnny say, in the quavering tones of an aged butler. "You're looking splendid, sir."

Splendid—that was his cue! What should he say? The words refused to come.

"Perfectly splendid!" observed Jane, trying to help him.

"If you ask me," observed the nonchalant Percy, "I think he looks like a deaf mute!"

None of these lines were in the play as the author had written it. Jane and Johnny had repeated his cue in the hope of reviving his memory; they had almost succeeded, when Percy had again induced temporary amnesia.

The audience laughed, and Percy smirked. Amid the laughter Jane and Johnny tried to whisper his lines to Billy. But he was far too flustered to hear them.

"What?" he whispered. "What did you say?"

In a lull of the laughter the audience heard his questions. He had given himself away.

The laughter rose to a terrific roar, and those in the crowd who knew him shouted: "Oh, you Billy!" "Take a memory course!" "Back to truck-driving for you, Billy!" and comments of a similar encouraging nature.

When this had lasted for several minutes, which seemed as many decades to Billy, he threw up his hands helplessly and ran from the stage. The audience yelled.

Jerry Bishop, off-stage, gave a crisp order. The curtain fell. And Billy, behind a stack of trunks, held his head in his hands and made queer noises. As soon as he had got off the stage, the lines of his speech had returned to him. But his failure was no less ignominious for that.

II.

"I'm sorry, Billy," said Jane.

The leading lady and Billy Wyatt were consuming nut sundaes, with a dietetic recklessness common to youth, in Sonora's favorite, and only, after the theater resort.

"Wasn't it awful?" Billy asked. "I don't know what happened to me, but as soon as I got on the stage my mind went blank. I just couldn't say anything or do anything. When you and Johnny said 'Splendid!' it didn't mean a thing to me. I wanted to say 'Splendid!' too, but I realized that it wouldn't make sense. And when Percy—"

"Percy's a beast!" announced Jane with considerable vehemence. "Just wait until Johnny and I get a chance—we'll fix him!"

"I guess I should have done what Johnny advised—walked over and punched him," offered Billy. "But I was paralyzed. When the crowd laughed, all I could do was to run. And now Jerry's so sore that he won't take me along even as a bohunk! And I wanted to travel with the company!"

"I'm sorry, Billy!" murmured Jane. "Can't you come to Las Vegas with us? We leave to-morrow morning, you know."

"I know. But how can I go? Johnny would take me in his car, I guess, but what would I do when I got there? Jerry hates the sight of me, and he's boss. No, I'll have to stay in Sonora—and I'm sick of Sonora!"

"We'll be back next year, Billy. A year isn't so very long."

Billy smiled, but in his opinion it was entirely too long. He had been in Sonora for nearly a year, and it was the longest, dreariest period he could remember—until the Bishop Players, and Jane, had come.

He had met Johnny Forbes at table in the Chinese restaurant. Over their bowls of chop suey they had talked, and Johnny had taken a liking to the youngster.

To the comedian Billy had confided his dissatisfaction with life in Sonora, a town of one main street, adobe houses and few trees. Billy was openly envious of Johnny's way of life.

"Why don't you join us?" Johnny had asked, after they had become friends. "Say, son, I'll fix it with Jerry. The show we're putting on Saturday has a part that's usually played by our advance man. Ordinarily we put it on Monday, before he goes on to the next town. Sometimes he comes back to play it. But it's only a small part, and you could do it. Jerry won't pay you much—Jane and I are the only ones that get any money—but it will start you with us. And then we can figure out some other way for you to go along. What say?"

"Gee, I couldn't act!" Billy had protested, with considerable truth.

But Johnny Forbes had urged and encouraged him to make the effort. And Billy had at last agreed to try.

He had tried and failed; he knew that he had angered Jerry Bishop, who had never been friendly, and perhaps he had also lost the stanch support of Johnny. Now there wasn't any chance for him to accompany the Bishop Players.

And now there was even more reason for his desire to join the troupe. There was Jane!

Percy Boynton was the only young, unattached member of the Bishop Players. He was a cousin of Jerry Bishop, and was therefore somewhat privileged—and insolent in consequence. As an actor, as Johnny Forbes remarked, Percy would have made an excellent haberdasher.

Percy admired Jane and assumed toward her a proprietary air that was inspired by Jerry. It was Jerry's hope that Jane would marry Percy, and in that way become a member of the family. Then he need never fear her resignation.

As it was, Jerry was afraid that Johnny was coaching the girl for a greater theatrical world. It was possible that she even dreamed of Broadway. Popular and talented leading ladies were not easily found, and a great deal of the success of the Bishop Players depended upon Jane.

Jane had no better opinion of Percy than had Johnny Forbes. He bored her, he angered her, he pursued her whenever he was not pursuing some silly town girl who thought he was a great actor.

When Johnny had brought Billy Wyatt round and had introduced him to the Players, including Jane, the leading lady met a young man so different from Percy that she was favorably impressed from the beginning.

Jane met few personable young men, traveling as she did. There were stage-door Johnnies, of course, silenced with a glance or with the good right hand of Johnny Forbes. But, otherwise, there was only Percy.

Billy Wyatt was a welcome relief. And when they met Billy happened to be wearing the clothing that was worn by most men of Sonora—a sombrero of incredibly wide brim, a bright-colored bandanna round his throat, a leather jacket, and riding boots.

Billy had just come in from a ride. It was natural that he should invite Jane to ride with him next morning, for in Sonora horseback riding is about the only recreation.

So for a week they had ridden together. And Billy had improved each shining hour by making the most of Jane's presence in Sonora. If Jane had small opportunity to meet young men, Billy was similarly handicapped. Sonora boasts some alluring *señoritas*, but for Billy their brunette beauty was not half so attractive as Jane's red-gold hair and gold-cream skin.

"I wish you could come to Las Vegas, at least," Jane was saying. "You know it's rodeo week, there, and I wanted to go with you. I'm sure I won't understand all the stunts, but you could explain them. I'm just wild to see the bull-dogging contest!"

"Me, too," said Billy. "I wish I could go!"

They were silent, each looking down at the remnants of a nut sundae. Mournful, tragic youth; youth about to part.

Into this Ibsen-like scene entered Johnny Forbes. Johnny always made an effective entrance, and this one was no exception.

"Children!" said he. Billy and Jane looked up. "Smile, for I am Santa Claus!"

Johnny pulled out a three-legged chair, ordered a soft drink, and looked round to grin at his many admirers. A short while before they had seen him as an aged butler, with a bald head; now they saw him as a hearty, healthy man of forty-five.

"That's Johnny Forbes!" they told one another. "He's funny! He's the best actor in the company!"

"Well, Santa Claus!" said Jane. "Tell us!"

Johnny sipped his drink with deliberate artistry. He looked at Billy.

"Jerry was willing to murder you, son!" he announced.

"I know it," Billy nodded. "And I don't blame him."

"But Santa Claus fixed it!" went on the comedian.

"How, Johnny?" demanded Jane.

"I told him any good actor was apt to get stage-fright. I said I might even get tongue-tied if Percy gave me a line that

wasn't in the show. Yes, I said it might happen Monday night, when we open in Las Vegas. I told him I felt it coming on." Johnny laughed. "In fact, you might say I threatened to lose my voice."

"But there was no excuse—" Billy began. "I can't act, that's all."

"Well, with this new job, you don't have to act."

"New job?" echoed Billy. "You mean you've really fixed it with Bishop—so I can join the company? After what happened?"

"I heard you and Jane say you wanted to see the rodeo," smiled Johnny, "and so I fixed it so you could go to Las Vegas, at least. And if you make good there, by that time I think I'll have another plan, and you can join us regular. That is, if you want to."

"Do I want to? Oh, boy!" cried Billy. "But what can I do?"

"Well, you know that Jerry's crazy about publicity. When I found out how sore he was, I had to think hard. But finally I landed on a whale of an idea. If we could have one of the Bishop Players entered in the rodeo, in some event or other, and have it announced in front of the grandstand that the Bishop Players would appear in 'Ain't We Got Fun?' or some other darn show to-night, we'd get a full house and then some.

"That was my idea. So I said to myself, 'Johnny, none of these hams in the company can do any stunts, and all you can do is a little Will Rogers roping. So what to do?' Then I thought of you, son. 'Hurray!' says I. 'Billy can sure ride, and he's got a lot of nerve, any place but a stage. So Billy's elected. He's only appeared once, but that makes him a Bishop Player. All right! We'll put Billy in the bull-dogging contest! That's a nice easy stunt, and—'"

"Bull-dogging! Gosh, I never bull-dogged a steer!" gasped Billy.

"Oh, no!" cried Jane. "It's dangerous—awfully dangerous! Why, men get killed doing it!"

"They do?" asked Johnny. "I didn't know that. I thought anybody that could handle a horse could do it. All you have to do is to jump for the steer's neck, grab him by the horns and twist him down. It looks easy. Anyway, I didn't see any other chance for Billy to join us, and so I told Jerry that he was some bull-dogger.

"And Jerry fell like a ton of hard coal—not because he's fond of you, Billy, but because he can no more resist a chance to get publicity than I can resist a drink of orange phosphate. So you're entered in the bulldogging stunt. We wired the advance man to fix it up. And now you're expected to do your duty."

Jane and Billy looked incredulous, while Johnny smiled. Good horseman that he was, Billy was in no sense a stunt rider. And as for bulldogging a steer, that was an art requiring long practice, much training, and great skill.

"Gee, I don't—" Billy began.

"Don't you try it, Billy—it's too dangerous!" protested Jane.

But Billy was weighing the matter carefully. He had seen it done, of course. It might not be so terribly difficult. If he could practice a little on some gentle bovine he might be able to tackle a steer.

"Well, I thought you wanted to join us," Johnny was saying. "And so I did the best I could for you. I've got another idea, too, and if you do this stunt I'll try to fix it for you. But it will take a little time, and Jerry won't listen to it unless you pull off the bulldogging."

"What's the other idea, Johnny?" Jane was sarcastic. "Something soft like riding in a wild horse race?"

"No; this other one's as harmless as swatting flies. I'll tell you about it later. Well, Billy, what say?"

"I'll try it," announced Billy, "but I think it's a bum steer."

"You won't when you see it," laughed Johnny, "because they've got the wildest steers of the range up there."

"Billy, you must not!" Jane repeated.

"Oh, I can do it all right!" said Billy. "It's all a matter of timing your jump. It's a darn sight easier than acting, I'll say that. When do we leave?"

"Eight o'clock in the morning," Johnny told him. "You ride with me—and you too, Jane, if you like."

"You bet I like! I'm going to see if I

can't dissuade this man from getting himself killed."

"Not a chance," said Johnny. "And I'll bet anything you say that Billy doesn't get stage-fright in that show."

III.

THE annual Cowboys' Reunion at Las Vegas is an event of more than local importance. From all parts of the Southwest come cowmen and pioneers, the younger ones to engage in competition, the older ones to renew acquaintance with the widely scattered companions of their youth.

For months before a Taos Indian had been gathering wild horses from remote Utah mesas. Wild steers from the ranges had been herded to Las Vegas; calves that had never felt a rope were there for the roping contest; and wicked horses, wild of eye, wise to every pitch and twist that would unseat a rider, trembled in their corrals.

"Get ready for the calf-ropin' contest!" bellowed the announcer through his megaphone.

"Gee, bulldogging is next on the program!" said Billy Wyatt. "Gee!"

"What's the matter, son?" demanded Johnny Forbes. "I looked over those steers, and they seem as tame as so many Persian cats. Didn't you say you tried it out on a cow and that it was easy?"

"Yes, but she was a Jersey dairy cow. Those steers only look tame, 'cause they're all together in a corral. As soon as they let 'em out, one at a time, and a rider goes after 'em, they go crazy. And if the rider misses, when he jumps for their horns, they will gore him sure. Gee, bullfighting is a cinch compared to this!"

"Well, if it's as bad as that—I don't want to see you get hurt—maybe you'd better stall. You can do that, all right. Just have some trouble with your horse, and let the darn steer get away. You can pretend to chase him, but never get close enough to jump. Nobody will blame you for that."

"No, sir! I said I'd bulldog a steer, and I'm going to do it."

"That's the stuff!" Johnny slapped him on the back. "That's the stuff! I've got a bet with Percy that you'll do it. And Jane says you will, too, though she tried mighty hard to get you to quit before you had started."

"I'll try it, but I'm afraid I'm going to be out of luck."

Billy looked up to the grand stand, where Jane and the other members of the company were seated. He didn't see Percy there, because he was not looking for him. But Jane, in a brilliant orange dress, was there.

She waved her encouragement, and although she was quite a distance from him, Billy knew that she smiled. He waved to her, and then turned to Johnny.

"The great stunt is to get your steer as quickly as possible, right in front of the grand stand. They're all trying for record time, and the dulldoggers are betting each other that they'll make records. Of course, it's partly luck. If your horse is quick enough and the steer doesn't get too much of a start, you have a chance to get him in a few seconds. And if he's not too tough, you can twist him down in a few more seconds."

"I'll bet you make a record," said Johnny loyally. "Just show me some of their money!"

"No!" Billy objected. "I don't expect to get my steer in less than a couple of minutes, and some of these boys have done it in fifteen seconds. I'll consider myself lucky if I get him at all."

The calf-roping contest, which had been going on in the arena where they stood, was nearly over. Presently the announcer would summon all bulldoggers to get their horses ready. Billy felt much as he had felt when he walked on the stage Saturday night.

Percy Boynton, who had absented himself from the grand stand, was, on the other hand, in excellent spirits.

Percy, who fancied that he resembled the Prince of Wales, and strove hard to dress the part—not an easy thing to do, on his salary—had regretted his wager with Johnny. His dislike of Billy had made him reckless, and he had bet fifty dollars.

The more he thought about it, the less

wisdom he saw in it. He knew Billy could ride well; and both Johnny and Jane were sure that he would get his steer. If he did, Percy would lose fifty dollars. He had no desire to suffer such a loss; to do so would mean that he could not buy the silk shirts he had been hoping for.

Percy became thoughtful. And, presently, as his thoughts became definite ideas, he left the grand stand and sought out the man who had charge of the bulldogging contest.

"Which is the worst steer in the pen?" asked Percy.

"Wal, the only way to find that out, mister, is to tackle 'em, one at a time. Want to try it? Walk right in an' make yourself at home."

Percy manifested no desire to follow that suggestion.

"But which is the meanest of the lot, to judge from their looks?"

"Wal," said the man in charge, a veteran of many rodeos, now too old to do any bulldogging, "I'd say that long-horned, wild-eyed son of a mastodon over there *looks* the meanest, only you can't always tell by lookin' at 'em."

Percy surveyed the maligned beast with a speculative eye. He agreed that in appearance it was the least affectionate.

"Say," he whispered in the tone favored by conspirators, especially by stage conspirators, "there's ten dollars in it for you if you'll see that this Billy Wyatt gets that one!"

If by an investment of ten dollars Percy could win Johnny's fifty, he meant to do so. The veteran bulldogger looked at him for a moment, rolled a cigarette reflectively, and nodded.

"Give me the *dinero*," he said at last. "I'll see to it."

Percy chuckled, and handed over the ten-spot. After which, quite happily, he returned to the grand stand, to sit beside Jane.

"Bulldoggers, get ready!" shouted the announcer.

"Now we'll see our friend do his stuff" said Percy, chuckling at a joke that was his secret.

Jane did not make any comment, but she watched Billy get on his horse and ride down to the steer corral.

Billy was pleased with the horse that he had been able to hire. It was a rangy, sure-footed, quick-starting animal, experienced in bulldogging. If Billy failed, it wouldn't be the horse's fault. Merely to be in the saddle gave him a little confidence, and he rolled a cigarette with steady fingers.

"Are you Billy Wyatt?" called the veteran at the corral gate.

Billy nodded.

"Here's ten dollars for you," said the older man. "Some friend of yours—a young feller, kind o' pale, with pants that looked like they was made for his daddy—handed it to me if I would wish a bad steer onto you. I figgered I might as well take it, and pass it on to you, 'cause a poor bulldogger don't get much in this world."

"Percy Boynton!" Billy said to himself.

"He didn't give me his card," said the other. "There's the steer he picked for you to get gored by. It ain't any worse than the rest, so if you don't mind I'll assign him to you. A bargain's a bargain, and I agreed you should get that one."

"Let's split the ten-spot, then," suggested Billy.

"No, I don't need it. I've got a lot of 'em in the Las Vegas bank. And you'll earn it—any bulldogger does. Say, I hear you're an actor. You don't look the part. That other fellow did, now. Ever do any bulldoggin'?"

Billy shook his head. "Not yet," he said. "But I can ride, and I practiced on a cow this morning."

"Well, it ain't so hard. The thing to do is to get right after your steer. If you get close to him before he gets to running down the track, you're all right. Watch your chance and jump. If you can lean over and grab his horns and sort of let him pull you off your horse, you're set pretty. Then—twist! Don't let go, no matter what happens. I used to do it in twelve seconds."

"Maybe I can in sixty—if I'm lucky. Thanks for the tip."

Before Billy had time to think of the treachery of Percy, the announcer was proclaiming that the bulldogging contest was the next event.

"We have with us today," he megaphoned, "Mr. Billy Wyatt, of the Bishop Players, who will attempt to bulldog a wild steer. The Bishop Players will appear tonight and every night this week in the great tent down by the river. We are proud to have Billy Wyatt show us how they bulldog steers on the stage. Ladies and gentlemen, the bulldogging contest!"

Billy was the fourth contestant. As each man rode out after his steer, the announcer called his name.

"Joe Burns coming out!" he shouted.

"I'm next!" Billy whispered to himself.

Joe Burns made a long leap, caught the steer by one horn, and tried to reach the other. The steer, maddened by the shouting crowd and the man who had attacked him, fought hard, dragging Burns in the dust of the track.

Failing to catch the second horn, Burns was forced to let go. The steer, catching him as he leaped aside, thrust a vicious horn into his side and ran, free, down the track. Burns, stunned by the attack, fell in the dust, holding his side with both hands.

Men ran to him, helped him to his feet, and half carried him to a bench. Billy, white and tense, had no chance to learn how badly he was hurt. His own name was being called.

"Billy Wyatt, of the Bishop Players—coming out!" droned the announcer.

Billy, waiting for his steer to be released, had time for a glance at Jane. She was sitting forward, eager, alert, waiting. He had to get that steer!

He held his nervous horse in readiness for the quick start. Then—so suddenly that it was confusing—the gate opened, the steer ran out, paused, wilder of eye than ever, and Billy saw the starter lower his flag. He spurred his horse, and got away just as the steer leaped forward to freedom down the track.

"Come on, broncho!" Billy pleaded.

The horse sped forward, gaining on the steer, which was now nearing the grand stand. A great shout went up from the spectators, but Billy didn't hear it.

The steer, sensing the horse's nearness, swerved toward the fence. The horse, trained for the sport, headed it off. Now—now—now was the moment, the second, for attack.

Billy shook his feet out of the stirrups, leaned over to the right, reaching toward those long, cruel horns. The steer got out of the corner and raced forward. But the horse was even swifter. Now the chance had come.

Billy caught one horn, then the other, and felt himself being jerked out of the saddle. His horse ran on, reins flying, and he fell half to the ground as the steer turned and twisted and snorted furiously; but he held on.

He had to, for his fear of those horns, should he let go, was too great to permit him to relax.

His feet struck the earth and he received a terrible jolt. But still he held on. It seemed natural, then, to twist the steer's great neck. He pulled down on the horns while the beast puffed and glared and tried to free itself. Down, down, down—until the steer was on its knees. Harder still, though he was sure his hands were bleeding, until the steer fell to its side, rolled a little and lay still. Out of the corner of his eye Billy saw the starter's flag go down.

Up in the judge's stand they would have his time. A stop-watch had recorded the seconds between the starter's gestures. It must have taken him three minutes, instead of two, Billy reflected. The time seemed terribly long.

He did not realize, for some while, that he had done his duty; he held on to the horns as if he could not let go. Some one shouted to him, and then he leaped away.

The steer, calm now and happy to be released, ambled off down the track. And then Billy saw that the announcer had raised his megaphone to his lips.

"Billy Wyatt," the announcer shouted. "Time—fourteen seconds flat!"

Fourteen seconds! Billy stood in a daze, unable to comprehend. There must be some mistake. He could never have done it in

fourteen seconds. Maybe he said forty. That was more like it, but even forty was better than he had anticipated.

"Did he say fourteen seconds?" he demanded of the man nearest him.

"You bet! Some bulldogger! Why, son, that's the best time anybody's made so far. I wouldn't be surprised if it's the best time for the whole week, and if it is you get the hundred dollars."

"Gee!"

It was some seconds later that Billy understood that the crowd in the grand stand was cheering him. He saw Jane standing up, waving and shouting and crying. They were cheering him! Gee!

He waved back, gave a jerky little unprofessional bow, and then retreated over a fence.

As he fled, the announcer's voice carried to him.

"The management of the Bishop Players," came through the megaphone, "wishes me to announce that Billy Wyatt, the expert bulldogger, will appear in person in to-night's show! Hurray for Billy Wyatt!"

Another cheer was given, and Billy turned to the announcer.

He—appear in person—on the stage! Not much! Never again! Then he saw that Johnny Forbes was standing beside the announcer. It must have been Johnny who had suggested that.

But he couldn't do it, not for Johnny, not for Jane. He might be able to bulldog a steer, but he couldn't act. And he would not try again; the very thought of it made him shudder.

He wondered what that other idea of Johnny's was—that would enable him to join the company. Not acting—no more of that for Billy Wyatt. But anything else he would try. And now that he had succeeded at bulldogging, perhaps Jerry Bishop would give him some other chance.

Johnny Forbes ran up to him.

"Say, I'm not going on the stage!" Billy told him.

"You sure are!" announced Johnny. "I've fixed it fine. Why, everybody in town will come to see you. Oh, why didn't you let me bet those other bulldoggers? Why, son, you've made a record!"

"But I'm not going to act!"

"That's all right, Billy. We're putting on the same show we gave Saturday night. You have the same speech. And you won't get stage-fright before this crowd—they're all for you! You have to do it, see, or else we won't be shooting square with the crowd."

"Not with Percy on the stage!" protested Billy. Then he remembered what Percy had done. "Say, that ham!"

"Never mind him!" said Johnny. "I took fifty dollars away from him!"

"And I took ten!" echoed Billy. He began to laugh, for now Percy's treachery seemed funny.

"And I've got another idea for you!" promised Johnny. "This one's a world-beater!"

"I'll bet! What do you want me to do—make a high dive into a ten by ten tank containing two feet of water?"

"No, this one's safe—absolutely safe and within the law. I'll tell you about it later. I want to see this wild horse race—you ought to be entered in it, too—and if I'm not mistaken Jane's trying to call you to her. Run along."

IV.

In every Western town, however small and however far from China, there is a Chinese restaurant. Also, there is a Greek restaurant. For some reason having to do with international politics, perhaps, you will find that members of the theatrical profession prefer the Chinese to the Greek.

Johnny Forbes was addicted to chop suey. To Lew Sing's establishment, therefore, he led Jane Bishop and Billy Wyatt.

"Percy's paying for this dinner," said Johnny. "So eat hearty, my lads! Our Percy won't have a new shirt for several weeks."

Billy had already told Johnny of Percy's attempt to bribe the bulldogging official. And Johnny, entirely without malice, was eagerly framing plans for getting back at the handsome juvenile.

"Listen!" said he. "Let's fix it so that Percy won't have a chance to-night. When we're on the stage, we'll leave Percy out

of it altogether, and if he tries to speak we'll interrupt him. It's not hard to fluster him, and we can do it."

"Lord, no!" protested Billy. "I'm scared now. If I can get through that one speech I'll be doing well. But I can't try any tricks. Why did you have 'em announce that I would appear in person?"

"We'll have to give 'em what they want," Johnny declared. "And they want you. If you didn't appear, they wouldn't believe you were a member of the troupe. You've got to appear, to let 'em know that an actor can be a bulldogger and *vice versa*. But you won't have to act after to-night, if you don't want to. This other idea—"

"What is it?" demanded Jane and Billy simultaneously.

"It's a wow!" declared Johnny. "The wonder of it is that nobody has thought of it before! But that's no wonder—they're all dumb-bells. Jerry would never have thought of it. About all he can think about is that orange grove he's hoping to buy. But this is a stunt that Billy can do, easy! And it will make him a hundred dollars a week, if it's handled right. It's all yours, kid, as long as you want to stick with the company. And unless I'm half-blind, that will be as long as Jane stays."

Billy blushed and Jane lowered her eyes. But there was admission of the charge clearly expressed in their faces.

Under the table Billy found and held Jane's hand. When he had met her, right after the bulldogging, her eyes had been filled with tears, but she had smiled. She had been desperately afraid that he would be injured; she had wept for him; but her tears and her smile had shown her pride in him.

Now, if Johnny's plan would make it possible for him to remain with the company, it would mean that Jane—

"Why, sure," Johnny was saying. "In a little while you can be driving your own car, you and Jane, and laying by enough during the season to last through the winter. Only I hope that Jane won't troupe with this outfit much longer. You ought to try Broadway, at least, sister."

"And starve doing it!" laughed Jane.

"I guess Billy wouldn't let you starve. A man that could bulldog a steer ought to be able to handle Broadway managers. If you stay another year with this outfit you'll be ready for the Big Town."

"But what's your idea?" insisted Billy.

"Simple as the alphabet!" said Johnny. "You know Jerry has several side grafts that he works—like selling those boxes of bum candy before the show starts. Well, that little stunt supplies all of our cars with gas and oil. But it doesn't make anything extra. Then he has those signs painted with advertisements of local merchants, hanging inside the tent. Well, that nets the company a little money, but not much. Now my idea is a printed program!"

"A program!" cried Jane. "Oh, that will be swell!"

"You bet. It will be the last word of class! Now I've already got an estimate on what it will cost to have 'em printed. We'll have that done in Los Angeles, or somewhere out there. It won't cost much, by the hundred thousand. Everything will be printed except the name of the local town, the date of our showing, and the local ads. Then, when we approach a town, all you have to do, Billy, is to rope in a couple of hundred dollars' worth of advertising, hand the programs to the local printer, and have him fill in the blank spaces. It'll be easy! All the shows for a week will be listed, with the names of the players and little items about us. I'll make the tent company come through with a big ad, and we can get one from the railroad that we ship over. And also from the automobile companies where we got our cars. This in addition to the local ads. What say?"

"Great!" said Jane. "But won't Jerry want the lion's share?"

"He may want it, but will he get it? Nix!"

"But I don't know whether I can get the ads!" protested Billy.

"Say, you must have one of those inferiority complexes!" observed Johnny. "A man that can bulldog a steer in fourteen seconds flat can sure twist the neck of an advertiser!"

"Of course you can!" said Jane.

"I'll see that you get started right," of-

fered Johnny. "I can get an ad from anybody in any town, and if you'll need help I'll give you a hand. Why, Dr. Sun Yat Sen here would give you a twenty-five dollar ad without a murmur? Wouldn't you, doctor?"

The Chinese waiter beamed on Johnny.

"You tell 'em!" he said. "Velly funny man!"

"See!" proclaimed Johnny. "What did I tell you? Of course, we can't do it here in Las Vegas—it's too late! But I'll wire the order for the programs. They'll catch us at Raton, and you can start there. Why, it's a cinch—a hundred dollars a week, clear, all nice velvet gravy!"

Jane clapped her hands, and Billy beamed. Under the spell of Johnny's enthusiastic eloquence he had forgotten his fear of acting. And looking into the roseate future, glowing with the pigments from Johnny's palette, Billy beheld himself and Jane touring a wonderful country in an eight—or at least a six—cylinder car of incredible smoothness. It could be done, and he would do it!

They had finished dinner. Jane reminded them that it was time for making up.

"Our art is calling!" grinned Johnny. "Come on, buckaroo, and I'll slap your map full of grease-paint!"

But as he stopped to pay the check Johnny's eyes fell upon an irresistible gambling device. He could no more curb his inclination to gamble than he could control his hunger for chop suey. And this particular game was calculated to appeal to all who saw it.

In a glass case there was an array of glittering prizes—a gold watch, a pearl-handled revolver, a camera, a near-diamond ring, a cigarette case, fountain pens, and so forth. Below this case was a large square of cardboard in which many holes had been punched.

The holes were covered with thin tissue paper, and in each of them was concealed a tiny slip bearing a printed number. It cost ten cents to punch out a number, and if the number was the right one the puncher walked away with one of the prizes.

Johnny punched out several numbers and won nothing.

"Here, you try!" he said to Billy. "You were lucky this afternoon with that steer. Maybe your luck still holds."

Laughing, Billy inserted the punch into one of the holes. Out came number 1113.

"You win the pearl-handled revolver!" cried Jane. "Oh, it's a beauty!"

"I'll give it to you," said Billy.

Jane clapped her hands like a little girl who has been presented with a lollypop.

"Oh, I'd love it," she exclaimed. "But I'm afraid to carry it."

"It isn't loaded," laughed Billy.

"I know, but I'm afraid of it just the same. You keep it for me. And when we get a chance you can teach me to shoot."

"Come on! Art is calling!" said Johnny. And Billy thrust the gun into his hip-pocket.

They walked toward the great tent. It was only then, so happy had he been, that Billy remembered that he would have to appear on the stage.

The thought sent shivers up and down his spine, and his confidence left him. All through the first act, when Jane and Johnny were on stage most of the time, he would be alone, murmuring the lines of his long speech over and over again. And then the second act would begin—and he would have to go on.

And perhaps he'd forget his lines as he had before. Involuntarily, he began to mumble the speech as he walked beside Jane.

"Don't think about them!" she advised him. "The surest way of forgetting is to try to remember!"

But he couldn't follow her advice. He had to think about them. And, as his memory refused to function, he felt an uncontrollable impulse to run away.

V.

But he did not obey that impulse. The intermission between the first and second acts found him, as it had found him on the fateful Saturday night preceding, waiting in nervous terror for the ordeal.

This was much worse than bulldogging. There he had had a good horse to help him. But now he would have to go on the stage

before an audience that felt no restraints. Even with Jane's and Johnny's help it was a terrible ordeal. And there was Percy!

"Have you lost your voice yet?" Percy asked, between the acts.

"Not yet," answered Billy. "I've felt better ever since I got that ten dollars of yours."

"What ten dollars?" Percy was insolent and bland.

"The ten dollars you paid that man at the rodeo, for giving me the wildest steer."

"I—I—I don't know what you're talking about," was Percy's feeble denial.

"No? Well, he gave me the ten-spot, and also gave me the steer. That squares us all around, except that I haven't repaid you for your evil intentions."

Percy disappeared. The fact was, he was not a very courageous soul. And there was something in Billy's eye, just then, that made him fear a physical encounter.

Billy was in such dread of treading the boards that it would have relieved him greatly to be able to punch Percy's face. Fortunately, Percy disappeared and took the temptation with him. Fortunately—because Jerry Bishop would not be cordial if Billy struck Percy. Mrs. Jerry was very fond of Percy.

Jane gave him an encouraging smile before she took her place on the stage. That helped some, but it caused that silly speech to get away again.

He managed to recall the beginning of his lines just as he heard his cue. He entered, speaking, but he knew that his voice was little more than a whisper.

He wondered why his perfectly strong lungs couldn't make his voice carry. The reason was that he was breathing in short, choky gasps.

But if his words were inaudible, it didn't matter. He was compelled to stop speaking as soon as the audience saw him. A great roar filled the tent, as if a herd of lions had been let loose.

"Bulldogger! Bulldogger! Bulldogger!" the crowd called. "Oh, you bulldogger!"

What did they care about the show? Here was a bulldogger, and a good one. They had come to see him, not to see the show. And Billy stood there, his mouth open, surprised and a little dazed by the reception.

"Bow!" commanded Johnny Forbes. "Bow and smile!"

Like an automaton, Billy managed to bow and his lips curved into a frozen grin. That didn't matter, though; across the footlights it looked like a regular smile.

The uproar continued for many minutes, during which Johnny had a chance to get close to Billy.

"Keep on bowing and smiling!" he whispered. "You're stopping the show, kid! And as soon as they let up a little, hold up your hand for silence. Then walk down stage a bit and say, 'Thank you!' After that, if they'll let us, we'll go on with the show! Do as I say!"

Billy heard the whispered instructions. Also, he saw Jane's tremulous smile, saw her clap her hands to the audience, joining in their applause, and, besides, he observed Percy's aloof, supercilious sneer.

As soon as the shouting died down a bit, he walked forward. He held up his hand, and there was silence.

"Thank you!" he called, and bowed low. Again there were cheers, prolonged cheers, and Billy, stepping back to his position on the stage, lifted his hand again for silence. After a moment, it came.

"Well, sir, you're looking splendid!" quavered Johnny Forbes, getting into the play again.

"Perfectly splendid!" echoed Jane, joyously.

It was time for Billy to speak. Those lines! He hesitated. Yes, he knew them, but it was hard to get started.

He wanted to clear his throat, but the speech was not the sort of speech that could be preluded. He hesitated a second longer. And in that second's hesitation, he saw Percy's lips move. Percy was up to his old trick—he was going to do what he had done on Saturday night.

"If you ask me," Percy got off with his usual nonchalance, "I think he looks like a deaf mute!"

Sure enough! Percy had tried being smart again. But this time the crowd, knowing Billy's valor in the bulldogging

contest, did not laugh. They waited, alert, to see what a bulldogger would do under such circumstances.

They did not have long to wait, for Billy was seething with anger. He'd fix Percy!

In his momentary madness, his hand fell upon the butt of the pearl-handled revolver. Out it came, gleaming with unmistakable malevolence. It pointed at Percy, whose hands involuntarily reached into the air.

Before he knew what he was doing, Billy began to speak.

"I'll not stand for that sort of thing!" he was saying. "I've had enough of it. The next time you try it, I'll shoot—and shoot to kill!"

Percy, his face white through his make-up, began to retreat. Johnny was the first to grasp the situation.

"Don't shoot, sir!" he pleaded. "Please don't shoot. Lord knows he deserves it, but don't kill him. Think of his mother, sir, think of her!"

Jane jumped at the chance, running to Billy and seizing his arm.

"Dearest, don't!" she added her plea to Johnny's. "He's not worth killing—and I love you!"

These lines were, of course, improvised, but Johnny and Jane saw to it that they could be fitted neatly into the scheme of the play as a whole.

In that play, Percy was enacting the rôle of the second villain—a youthful weakling who performed the unclean deeds of the major villain's devising. The scene that they had thrust into the play, and the lines they had added to the author's, rather strengthened a weak second act.

"Now get back to your real lines," whispered Johnny.

And Billy, the master of the situation, feeling quite at ease as he witnessed the discomfiture of Percy, swung into his memorized speech. The words flowed from his lips, and before he realized that he was acting he had delivered them all.

His speech was a denunciation of Percy, and it was a perfectly natural speech for him to make, feeling as he did. But he was supposed to be on the verge of a nervous collapse, and as his speech ended, his cue was to stagger and half-fall to the floor.

Then Jane ran to him, supported him, put her arms around him, and helped him out of the room. At that moment another player entered to take charge of Percy, now convicted of his villainy.

The scene went off very well, and Jane put an exceptional amount of realism into her embrace. As she and Billy made their exit, the audience cheered again, vowing that he was as good an actor as he was a bulldogger, which was going some! Billy, off-stage, sank into a chair and burst into laughter.

"You fixed him that time!" Jane applauded. "The poor fellow was scared to death! He thought it was loaded!"

"Wasn't it funny?" laughed Billy. "I had no idea of doing that. My hand just found the gun, naturally, and the first thing I knew I was off! Gee, Percy's face was funny!"

"I've got to go on again," whispered Jane. "My cue's coming. There it is! After the show!"

"After the show!" agreed Billy.

VI.

As Billy waited for Jane, after the show, he thought of his experiences during the past few days. It seemed to him that he had passed through one terror after another.

There was that first try at acting; he had been scared to speechlessness. Then there was the thought of bulldogging the steer; that had almost unnerved him. And there was to-night—as he waited his cue.

"It was terrible!" he said to himself. "But it's all turned out very well. It's been a comedy of terrors, but now—now I'm not afraid to tackle anything. I think I might even go in for acting—especially in the plays where I could be Jane's sweetheart, like to-night! I'm not afraid—"

He stopped, and his face turned pale.

For there was one thing, one supreme thing, that he was afraid of. He could go with the company now, thanks to Johnny. And if the program venture turned out well, and there was no reason why it shouldn't, he would prosper. And then—

He loved Jane. He had known it all along, from the time Johnny had introduced them. But now he was positive, beyond all doubt. Her embrace, to-night, as she led him tenderly off the stage, had made that clear. He loved her.

But Jane was the leading lady. Her salary was larger than any he had ever earned. She was ambitious. Perhaps she dreamed of Broadway, despite her light laughter when Johnny mentioned it.

Perhaps she wanted to be a great and famous actress. He wanted her to be famous if she desired it. But perhaps such a career would mean that he could have no place in her life.

That was what he was afraid of. And it was the greatest terror of all.

Jane came out of her dressing-room, radiant, glowing, desirable. As Billy rose to his feet, something deep within him prompted him to tackle this problem as he had tackled the steer, as he had tackled Percy.

He was filled with a desperate courage. He was a little mad.

"Jane!" And he seized her in his arms, held her to him, and kissed her. "Jane! I've got to know—now! Will you marry me—ever? Not right now. But some time. I've got to know. Will you?"

Jane didn't say anything for a moment. She could not, so tightly was she held in the bulldogger's arms. And, besides, his lips were pressing hers.

"If you'll let—let me—get my breath," she gasped, "I'd like—to say—yes!"

And for a full minute she couldn't get a breath!

THE END

BEREAVEMENT

THE winter grass, beneath low-hanging trees,
Is splintered emeralds, in a loamy frieze—
A cold mirage, to see but not to seize.

The shell-pink smoke, from out the chimney's throat,
Is twined in spirals, tremblingly, that float
Above the gleaming roof, with frosty coat.

The sumac leaves are little flames that lick
The mist that hovers, clammily and sick,
About the patch of gentians, blue and thick.

The geese, the ducks, the scuttling, whispering quail
Are panic-stricken craft that, hurried, sail
Along a windy, labyrinthic trail.

There's such a grandeur in the dying year!
I'd like to know that I, when death is near,
Could show it, too, that splendid lack of fear!

In veneration, I shall bow my head,
When every pulsing coloring is shed,
And say: "That was my friend, who now is dead!"

Sonia Ruthèle Novák.

The Helping Hand

By OLIN LYMAN

"WE'LL miss the train!" placidly wailed Aunt Emily Simmons.

"Fifteen minutes yet!" Lemuel Bass reassured her.

Down shady Elm Street they hurried; Lemuel and Uncle Joe Simmons ahead, Aunt Emily trailing, the seventeen-year-old twins as rear guard. They were laden with handbags, valises, a suit case and a telescope. Also, Aunt Emily carried a cage containing Ephraim, the canary, and a cat box wherein Gabriel, the tortoiseshell, yowled his wonderment at this unexpected pilgrimage.

Ohioans would have called it a pretty day, and it was quite as pretty in 'York State.

The August sunbeams, piercing whispering leafage, pooled in rippling puddles of light upon the flagging. Automobiles thrummed; a motorcycle coughed by; from across the lazy river drifted the clacking chuckle of the Hinckley cotton mills.

The party reached the little red brick station and Lemuel Bass bought four tickets which he thrust into the calloused hand of Uncle Joe. The baggage was checked; then sounded the distant whistle of the train.

Uncle Joe gripped the Bass hand hard. His gray eyes moistened in his melancholy old joss face adorned with its slithering white mustache. "Lemmie, the Lord be good to ye, as ye've been to me an' mine!"

The Bass voice boomed:

"Forget it, Uncle Joe; it's nothing at all! Why, if—"

But Aunt Emily, who had mothered him when he was little, was speaking; her trembling hand was clinging to his big paw. As he looked down into her blue eyes, wet and wistful, and felt toilworn fingers close about his own, he felt a thrill. This busy little hand had taught his own how to wring victory from the metropolis that had been his home for years now.

"Lemmie," she was murmuring, "it's good of you to give us this little vacation. Joe's so tired, an' expenses are so heavy we ain't had many outings late years. It'll be fine for the children, before school opens again. Lemmie, if it hadn't been for you—" She sniffed and stabbed at her eyes with a tiny polka dot handkerchief.

Clumsily, like an abashed hippopotamus, Lemuel tried to soothe her.

"Just like you, to think of the others without a word for yourself," he mumbled. "What's the idea, crying? Ah, say—"

To his relief the train came roaring to the platform. The twins came charging upon him. "Good-by, Uncle Lem'!" cried Mabel. "I'll drown Mallory up there, and everything!"

"Don't mind her, unc', she's crazy!" put in Mallory, fair haired and handsome in his Palm Beach suit. "We'll feed her to the wildcats. Here, ma, let me throw you aboard!"

Lemuel waved *au revoir* as the train whisked northward toward Owl Lake and the Bass camp, one hundred miles distant. Then he turned and walked back up Elm Street.

A mysterious smile crinkled his lips that had cultivated the lure of a regular he-Lorelei in the tumbling waters of salesmanship.

He whistled a blithe young tune. Removing his straw hat with a lordly gesture he allowed the summer zephyrs to croon to hair as rosy as optimism.

In reverie he explored his yesterdays, viewing a tousled boy of ten with freckles on his nose and sunshine in his soul. Aunt Emily had been divine toward the son of her dead sister, and Uncle Joe indulgent. Since babyhood he had been with them until, when twenty, he answered the megaphoned call of The City of the Golden Fleece.

New York had absorbed him, but never had he forgotten the home nest at Hinckley. Often he had written; had often come as a Greek god bearing gifts; often he had schemed to keep the home fires burning. A confirmed bachelor, all his human love thus far lay with the little family up among the hills.

He was prospering; the long grind in the cañons of opportunity had counted; his red head schemed for the happiness of the Simmonses; they should see. The trip to Owl Lake? Why, that was only the start!

Dreaming, scheming, fairly teeming with friendly plottings, Lemuel passed the little white Simmons cottage and came to People's Square. It was the business hub of the mill town with five thousand souls.

The soldiers' monument, flag staff and band stand, with a stretch of green park, occupied the center of the green plaza. Stores, movie theaters and lodge halls lined its edges; the Municipal Building, of brick and stucco, dominated it.

Horses drank contentedly at a stone trough carrying the chiseled name of a dead and gone donor. Through the square rumbled a car of the Afton and Gerrytown trolley line. Listless shoppers sauntered in intense heat. But Lemuel Bass, of unquenchable vitality, steamed briskly to his goal.

He sidewheeled into the household emporium of Jonas Banks. It was the same as in yesteryears except that the sweep of Banks' whiskers, once saffron, had silvered. Past two clerks Lemuel charged with outstretched hand upon the thin proprietor.

"Mr. Banks, you remember me? Lem Bass? Saw you first the time Aunt Em'ly Simmons brought me in here. I was knee-high to a tadpole then. Well, how time shimmies along! But you're looking fine, Mr. Banks. Feeling good, eh? Good!"

He pumped the withered Banks hand with gusto; he bestowed upon Jonas the beaming smile that the folks down in the big town could not resist; he radiated the charm that people found irresistible because it flowered from sincerity.

Mr. Banks peered in the gentle, candid wise way that Bass remembered. "Of course I remember ye. They say ye've done well down yonder. No surprise to me. I used to say any boy so bent on havin' his own way 'd get ahead, all right."

"Well," chuckled Lemuel, "I'll have my own way to-day with only us the wiser. I've sent the Simmonses up to my camp at Owl Lake for two weeks. While I think of it, here's the key to their house here. I'm

going to pick out new furniture for Aunt Emily, from attic to cellar, and have you put it in there.

"Got your pad handy, Mr. Banks? Well, let's start around. I've another errand to do; must step on the gas. Let's see—that's a foxy piece of something or other over there. Jot it down; I'll take it; go good in the parlor."

Somewhat dazed—such speed in shopping was not practiced in Hinckley—Mr. Banks tabbed the "foxy piece of something" for Mrs. Em'ly Simmons, via nephew Bass. It was a regular *piece de resistance*, a teakwood taboret. Later, for show purposes, Lemuel bought a rubber plant to top it.

"Say," ventured Jonas Banks, "I hear you're in real estate. Ever deal in housefurnishings?"

"Not any," chuckled Bass. "Just in dirt; building lots, you know. Bachelor; furnished suites; like most of us. Are you hinting to help me select?"

"Well," deprecated the country merchant, "if you'd like to—"

The Bass jaws clamped firm, with the same stubborness Banks remembered Lemuel displayed as a boy. "No! It's my party; I know what I want, hang the expense! Aunt Emily 'll be surprised, but nothing's too good for auntie!"

He started in at a breakneck clip while Mr. Banks trotted in his wake, writing feverishly. When they finished there was golden oak furniture for the dining room, mission furniture for the sitting room and Grand Rapids knick-knacks for the parlor. There were chairs that were not the same, a Tudor chair, a tête-à-tête and brass beds for the upstairs rooms.

Mr. Banks totted up the items; the total made him blink. However, Bass nonchalantly wrote a check. "Put in the new furniture," he directed.

"And what'll I do with the old stuff?"

"Get in touch with Aunt Emily about it, when she returns. Chuck it in a storehouse meanwhile."

Lemuel bolted out of the store, caromed across the square and turned south in Oak Street. He passed over the bridge spanning the Owingo River. In three minutes he arrived at the office of the Hinckley Cotton Mills.

His name announced at the information desk won immediate summons to the office of Frederick Rand, the superintendent, who was a frequent visitor to New York.

"I just received your word, and the money, Mr. Bass," greeted the big, bluff, gray man in the early sixties. "A fine deal, selling my Staten Island lots at that price. I had expected it to take a couple of years."

"Glad to oblige," beamed Bass. "Excuse my snapping into it, will you, Mr. Rand? I have to make the Rumford Military Academy from here. Surprising my relatives, the Simmonses. Just sent them north on a little pleasure jaunt. Called to see you about the boss machinist's job Sam Macklin is leaving."

"I can't imagine how you heard of that," rejoined Rand, tugging at his short beard. "Sam only told me yesterday."

"Same here. I had a letter from him two days ago. He has a married daughter on Long Island and inquired what he could do toward buying a little place near hers. I can fix him up. He said he'd saved some money and was getting old; guessed he'd retire. Good man, isn't he?"

"The best. I shall hate to lose Sam."

"Have you selected his successor?"

Frederick Rand shot him a swift look. "No. I haven't had time even to think about it."

Bass sighed his satisfaction. "Then that allows me to ask a little favor of you."

"Yes?" Rand's brows arched a double query.

Again beamed the Bass smile. A persuasive smile it was, to win hearts, to lull judgment, to secure dollars and favors far more intimate, beyond any sordidness. Unreckoned power was in that smile because it was honest.

He leaned forward in his chair and touched the superintendent's knee.

"Well, my uncle, Joe Simmons, has worked in that department for years. Often, when I was a boy—it was before you came to these mills—I have heard him wish he could climb. But he was always shy; kept himself in the background. Could you appoint him to Sam's job?"

Rand frowned speculatively at the floor, then at Lemuel Bass.

"What is it?" asked Bass. "Isn't Simmons perfectly capable?"

"He's wholly capable."

"Trustworthy? Conscientious?"

"Like a clock. Faithful. Popular. But I hadn't thought of him."

There was a moment's silence while the superintendent stared out at the placid river.

His was a face of power, etched with the sharp stylus of responsibilities. His head was sunk forward a little and his shoulders sagged as if with weariness. Presently his look returned to the waiting Lemuel.

"I'm glad to accommodate you, Bass," came his deep-toned decision. "We'll try Joe Simmons out as foreman machinist—and we'll see."

There were two more errands to transact up State. Late the next day Lemuel Bass returned to New York, happier than he had been in years.

II.

A SENSE of virtue lent force to Lemuel's ballyhooing for real estate during the next fortnight. Through the Bronx, among Long Island sand dunes, through the labyrinth of Brooklyn he ran his runabout, carrying the message of "Own Your own Home!" Energy tipped with gold the arrows of his logic; he did good to others and for himself.

In the evenings he would sit and smoke within his ready-furnished bachelor lodging in the Caveman Hotel uptown. Watching the blue haze he would find enjoyment in the thought that where too many men were small, he was large; where they were sordid, he was generous; where they pinched quarters, he allowed the minted eagle to flap its wings; that where they possessed minds, he owned also a heart.

Four days later there came to Lemuel a note from Aunt Emily, the cheap paper blurred with her tears:

DEAR LEMMIE:

The letters you had left on the new sitting room table for the children and the word for Joe received and everything else. How could you, Lemmie? I'm all broken up yet and can't write much, but you sure have a wonderful kind heart. With love

AUNT EMILY.

Lemuel Bass wanted to drop everything right away and run up there to enjoy it with them, but there were too many human fish biting. It was two weeks later when, without having written that he was coming, he walked with his black traveling bag up Elm Street in Hinckley.

The air was tinged with the bouquet of early September. A faint breeze stirred leafage already splashed with tints from the palette of autumn. The tiny lawns were more vividly green than they had been in midsummer, as if they clung to life more ardently now that the white pall of death had begun stealthily to creep down from the northland.

It was very quiet, a Sabbatarian serenity disturbed only by the shouts of some boys at play in a near-by field. Bass caught himself listening for the hum of the cotton mill, then smiled as he remembered it was Saturday afternoon.

From afar among the hills dwindled a locomotive whistle. The train he had left fifteen minutes before was hurtling on its westward way.

Lemuel reached the gate and hastened up the flagged walk to the neat little white cottage. The front door was ajar. Crossing the veranda he hurried inside. Through another open door he glimpsed a small figure seated in a rocker within the living room.

"Aunt Em'ly!" he called joyously, "here I am!" and rushed to her, dropping his bag.

She rose, accepting his eager embrace. Then he backed off, holding her by the shoulders, and peered down into her thin, lined, wistful face. What was the matter?

"Oh, my great big boy!" Auntie's tone and manner were minus her usual pep. He felt bewildered.

Lemuel sat down in one of the new chairs. Auntie resumed her seat in the rocker, facing him.

Lemuel stared at his dear little aunt. With hands folded primly in her gingham lap, she stared back at him.

Little ladies of less than five feet tall can, when dignified, be most ungodly overpowering. Was Lemuel mistaken, or did he detect in her attitude a puzzling if faint hostility?

With nervousness to which he was not accustomed he found a strained and would-be jocose voice, while he wondered whence had fled the usual camaraderie between them.

"Well, auntie, you found a surprise when you got back."

Her thin cheeks flushed faintly; her lips tightened a little. He knew the signs. But what was there for her to be nettled about, he wondered confusedly? Was that new rocker—uncomfortable?

Seeing the shadows gathering in his eyes Mrs. Simmons forced a smile. "You shouldn't have tried so much, Lemmie. All that money—" Her mouth trembled and she dabbed at wet eyes with her apron.

Lemuel ran to her and knelt, hugging her close. "God bless you, is that all? Why, I'd spend six times as much to make you happy, after all you did for me!"

"I know you would, but—" sniffed the small lady, and shed some tears upon his broad breast. A heavy tread thudded on the veranda. "Here comes your uncle," she told him huskily. "Excuse me, I must run out to the kitchen. My pies—" She trotted off.

A slow step sounded behind Lemuel. He turned to greet lean, lank, leisurely Uncle Joe, he of the nobly-shaped head and the wistful walrus mustache.

Poor Uncle Joe had toiled for years in the cotton mill at duties and wages far beneath his natural capacity, as he had frequently and mildly told the world. Now, thanks to the offices of nephew Bass, Mr. Simmons was foreman of the machinists.

Did uncle, upon rejoining his benefactor, register in Pollyanna? He did not. He extended, for nephew's clasp, a hand like a dead fish. His shoulders were bowed as with a burden. He "slumped" perceptibly in the knees. New wrinkles rutted his leathery cheeks.

Lemuel Bass clutched worriedly at his optimistic hair, underneath which the dreams of well doing were becoming jangled. What was the matter with everybody?

"H'lo, boy," croaked Uncle Joe, and sat down heavily in one of the new chairs. He and Lemuel stared at each other, their hands upon their knees. Mr. Simmons's visage could have been no blanker or coldly sad than if he were lying in state at his own funeral.

Lemuel felt something like creeping paralysis. This house should be one of mirth. Instead, it was a morgue.

While the men sat there, regarding each other mutely, from outside came sounds of animation. Mabel and Mallory Simmons burst into the living room. Hopefully Lemuel Bass rose to greet these young cousins who had always called him "Uncle" because he was much older than they.

He stopped short, his outstretched hands dropping uncertainly at his sides. The boy and girl had not flown to him as usual. They were silent and sullen.

"What's the matter?" asked Lemuel, chilled and perplexed as he noticed the angry flush in their faces. "Been having trouble?"

Mallory possessed a direct and disconcerting gaze. "Not between *us*. We agree for once. It was about *you*."

"Mal'!" cried his sister, "you mustn't!"

"About me?" interposed Bass. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I don't want to go to that military school you picked out for me, without asking me anything about it," retorted the boy, coolly enough. "And sis doesn't want to go to that boarding school in Hastings, either. You ask her if she does!"

"Mabel," coldly inquired Bass, with a sensation as if walls were tumbling about his ears, "is that true?"

"Y-yes, it's true. Mallory and I were just talking things over—again. I said I'd have told you so if you'd given me a ch-chance. I want to stay in town and learn to be a sten-stenographer!"

She ran upstairs crying. Uncle Joe, after a deprecatory gesture that sought to avert the explosion, had slumped in his chair, too abject for words.

"Mallory," asked Bass caustically, "what's the meaning of all this?"

Aunt Emily had sidled in from the kitchen, summoned by her daughter's sobs, and was listening. Mechanically Bass noticed that her lips were compressed, her attitude faintly hostile.

Mallory's voice now rose in boyish heat.

"It means folks have their own plans, their own ways! I won't show up next week at that military school; I don't care if you did pay in advance. The same goes for Mabel at the boarding school. I'm going to finish high school next year; then I'll work in the mill and study in spare time to be a surveyor. Confound it all, you've mixed us all up! Look what you've done to mother, cluttering up the house with all this junk!"

"Junk?" yelled Lemuel.

"Junk!" reaffirmed Mallory, of his knowledge and belief.

Since entering the house Mr. Bass's attention had been concentrated upon human reactions rather than furniture. Now he stared wildly about him.

For the first time he sensed the transformation effected by his Napoleonic impulse to master human destinies. Though he had never had the opportunity to cultivate artistic taste, somehow in this awful moment the ensemble of his rapid-fire selection at last conveyed to him the discouraging truth of Mallory's gibe.

It *was* junk.

The mission furniture, stark, somber, uncompromising, within that homely, bright-painted, little sitting room was hideous. The parlor door, ajar, showed the teakwood taboret topped by the rubber plant. The effect was—the limit. Even Lemuel could see that.

And now he was vaguely conscious of a crick in the back of his neck. To be sure, he had been sitting in that early Italian chair with the straight front or the straight back.

But Mallory was speaking again: "Look what you've done to dad!"

His mother ran to him. "Mallie! You mustn't talk so to Uncle Lem!"

Mallory shook off her hand.

"I will so!" he cried. "Anyhow, he's not my uncle! Cousins can talk! He's turned things wrong side out! 'Follow my leader,' says he, 'and I'm the leader!' Can you beat it? Got dad put in Sam Macklin's place as foreman; and here's dad, not eating and getting sick over the responsibilities. You don't want responsibility, do you dad? You just want to be let alone, isn't that so?"

In the sudden hush Lemuel Bass remembered something with cruel vividness. He saw himself with the superintendent of the Hinckley Cotton Mills. Frederick Rand was staring through the window, hesitating before he acceded to Lemuel's request to name Uncle Joe in Macklin's place. Joe was steady, capable, popular—*but*—

And Lemuel remembered Frederick Rand's face in that moment while he had hesitated; a face of power, etched with the sharp stylus of responsibilities — and shadowed a little with weariness. Rand had grown weary while managing men.

His look, returning to the present, enveloped Uncle Joe, a wan, tired, broken stick of a man, slouched uncomfortably in a new chair that fitted him no better than did his new job. In his worn, old easy chair he would have been at peace, just as in the monotonous groove of effort to which he was accustomed. The natural law now hit Lemuel Bass hard: for old men, old chairs, old jobs.

Mallory, the tide of his eloquence stilled for a moment, was eying his father expectantly, awaiting his answer. Joe Simmons eyed his heir with a sort of dead disapproval and wagged his gray head.

"Don't talk no more," he croaked.

"I will talk!" violently. "It 'll clear the air! I heard you telling ma last night you couldn't stand it; you might have a head, but it was too late to begin to use it now. And you're dead right; you're too darned old for a big job. What's Lem Bass picking on you for? Ma, she's been telling us all to put a brave face on it and do as Lem wanted us to, so as not to hurt his feelings. For one, I won't keep still! What about our feelings, Mr. Man?"

His fiery gaze held Lemuel's eyes that had never been so bewildered. The look compelled some kind of a reply.

"I—I just tried to extend a helping hand," mumbled Mr. Bass.

"Hand?" sneered the youth. "Use your head, man; use your head! Why don't you try letting folks run their own lives?" He stamped upstairs in the wake of his sister, who was weeping upon one of the new brass beds.

Dazedly Lemuel donned his hat, picked up his black bag and started out. He remembered vaguely that he had time to make the East bound train back to New York. His parting wavering glance took in Uncle Joe, humped miserably in a chair of some period or other, a chair which did not fit.

A scurrying rush from behind gave him pause as he stepped out of the front door. His aunt reached up to hug him, murmuring broken words.

"I'm sorry, Lemmie, it's turned out so. But it all had to come. I've had my hands full with the three of 'em, trying to keep peace. I'm so—sorry!"

He patted her thin shoulder. "There, there, auntie; don't cry. As usual, thinking of others and not of yourself. But I know there's something else on your own account. The new furniture; it's horrible, I get that now; but just what is the matter with it?"

"I'd rather not go into it," she told him, with a return of the funny little tightening of her lips. She drew away a bit.

"Please!" He clung to her helplessly as in the days when he was small.

She sighed tremulously. "Well, most of my furniture was over a hundred years old, and some of it two hundred. Family heirlooms, from my side of the house."

"Oh, Aunt Emily!" Except for that wail, Bass was beyond speech. A woman would love such old things, yes; and now he recalled having read somewhere that these heirlooms were very valuable.

"I didn't want to hurt you," went on Aunt Emily. "You've been so good to us—and spent all that money and all—"

Lemuel Bass clutched at a straw of hope. "You know, of course, Jonas Banks has the old furniture in storage, awaiting your order?"

"Yes."

"But you've hesitated about ordering him to send it back, and take this new junk out of here just on my account? Is that it?"

"Why, y-yes. That old furniture is very valuable, Lemmie, but I'm so sorry about all the money you spent for the new."

"Don't you worry about that money, Aunt Emily. I've learned a lesson that's cheap at the price. Tell you what to do. Have Banks make the transfer Monday. And I'm mighty glad that much is fixed, believe me. By, by, auntie. I'll skip the town till the clouds have rolled away!"

Sending her visibly brightened into the house, he strode along Elm Street, swinging his bag. The tongue of Mallory Simmons, tipped with cynical truth, was rasping again in his memory: "The helping hand, man—use your head!" And: "Why don't you let folks run their own lives?" True—had Lemuel Bass ever allowed anybody else to run *his* life?

That was it! Young Mallory had hit the nail on its reverberating head. A would-be helping hand, of purpose deflected—

Walking toward the station whence a train would presently yank him from Blunderland, Lemuel's thoughts were fragmentary, like the débris of a burst watermelon, and about as seedy.

There wailed a far-away whistle. The train was coming. Lemuel quickened his steps, eager for the roaring poppyland of New York.

THE END

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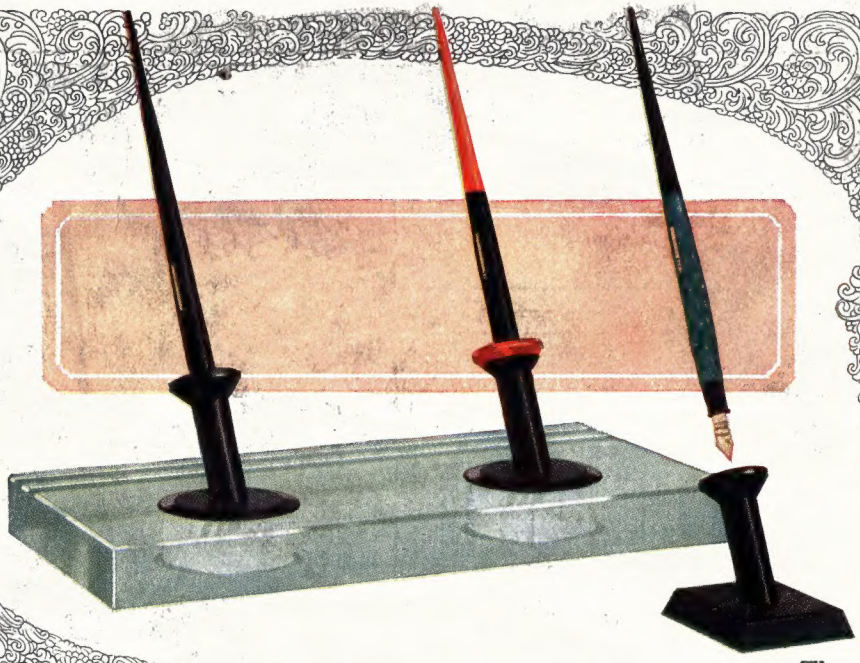

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